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Stereotyping and Cultural Misappropriation in Harmony Korine's *Spring Breakers*

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Stereotyping and Cultural Misappropriation in Harmony Korine's *Spring Breakers*

by

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Thesis

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Abstract

Stereotyping and Cultural Misappropriation in Harmony Korine's *Spring Breakers*

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After examining Harmony Korine's feature films, shorts, art installations, music videos, paintings, and novel, a clear pattern of stereotyping and misappropriating African American aesthetics emerges. This thesis addresses the mass appropriation of hip-hop aesthetics by whites, and Korine's complicity in this cultural phenomenon. Additionally, it explores the notion of hipster racism, Carmen Van Kerckhove's term for respected artists who feel enlightened enough to stereotype in an ironic or comedic manner. Looking closely at cultural appropriation in *Spring Breakers,* this thesis considers hipster racism and the notion of modern-day minstrelsy.

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CHAPTER 1: INTRODUCTION TO HARMONY KORINE

Through this master's thesis, I intend to explore the notion that Harmony Korine perpetuates racial stereotypes to achieve narrative economy, shock audiences, and create controversial films. I posit that Korine's racial representations are harmful to Blacks and work to maintain the status quo by portraying Blacks as oversexualized, violent, and deviant. Put simply, this thesis intends to answer following research question: Is the work of Korine harmful to Black people? And if so, how do his representations harm them?

In Korine's 2013 film *Spring Breakers*, "Alien" (James Franco) is a gun-totting, white rapper with cornrows and a grill, and one could make the argument that the film is an example of modern day minstrelsy. The irony here is that Korine proclaims to be a die-hard hip-hop enthusiast who loves Black people. Korine positions himself as an ally to the Black community; however, in actuality, all of his depictions of Black people are either satirical or pejorative.

I believe it is precisely Korine's "hipster" status that allows him to get away with his controversial racial representations. At a June 2010 film premiere Korine asked a Seattle crowd, "Do I like Black people? Who's my favorite Black person? Billy Dee Williams. You know that rapper Crunchy Black? Yeah I love Black people; in fact that's the one thing I noticed about Seattle. There's *(sic)* too many whites. I could never live in a place with that many honkies."[1] A couple months later, while participating in the German series *Durch die Nacht mit,* Korine told Gaspar Noe, "I grew up right down the

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1 Harmony Korine. *Trash Humpers Q&A*. The Northwest Film Forum, Seattle.18 June 2010. Web. 12 April 2013.

street. Now there's a lot more white people. White people have invaded, and it's gone a little downhill, in my opinion."[2] After saying this, the camera cuts to a shot of Black kids dancing around Korine, who exclaims, "These are my favorite people in the world. This is my extended family down in Nashville, Tennessee."[3] Later when Noe asks Korine where he would like to travel, Korine responds, "I'd like to go where there's not a lot of white people. I've always disliked white people. It just seems like white people always ruin everything."[4] In these segments, Korine's racial stance is pro-Black, but I ague in this thesis that his actual films negate that.

CHAPTER OUTLINE

Chapter 1: Introduction to Harmony Korine

In Chapter One, I offer a brief introduction to Korine, including his filmmaking influences and family history. I then cover the scholarly work on Korine, which, for the most part, has focused on Korine's portrayals of disenfranchised youths and his use of avant-garde filmmaking techniques. I identify the aesthetics behind Korine's films: European collaboration, multiple forms of media, use of non-actors, resistance to traditional narrative structure, lack of continuity editing, and a general fascination with deviance.

After identifying Korine's aesthetics, l outline the theories and methodology behind my analysis of Korine's work. My methodology is a hybrid neoformalist/representational approach that draws heavily on the work of African

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2 Ibid.
3 Ibid.
4 Ibid.

American music scholars and critical race theorists. At the end of Chapter One, I examine the problematic nature of racial satire; Korine's psychological need to stereotype; and how he uses satire to provoke.

Chapter 2: Hipster Racism

At the crux of my thesis is the idea that Korine's hipster status enables him to stereotype without much backlash. In Chapter Two, I look at the evolution of racism in the United States, as it has progressed from a rather overt form to a more insidious, coded form. Then I explore Carmen Van Kerckhove's term "hipster racism," which is essentially the use of irony by a privileged person to mask his or her racism.

I examine *Act da Fool* and *Snowballs*, two short films Korine was commissioned to make for high-end fashion label Proenza Schouler. The first is a crude portrayal of poor, African American girls. After this, I focus on Korine's extensive use of blackface in his paintings, art installations, short films, unfinished features, and one music video.

Chapter 3: Hip-Hop, Stereotyping, and the Misappropriation of African American Aesthetics

In Chapter Three, I begin to look closely at Korine's portrayals of African Americans in his films. I also examine Korine's relationship with the South African, white rap duo Die Antwoord; Korine recently shot a film with them entitled *Umshini Wan*. I look a bit closer at hip-hop in this chapter, and I hone in on Korine's preference for misogynistic music about drug dealing as opposed to politically conscious rap music. One of the most regularly featured characters in Korine's 1998 novel, *A Crackup at the Race Riots,* is Tupac Shakur. By looking at Korine's portrayal of Shakur in *A Crackup*, I

argue that Korine mocks the fallen rapper's intellectualism. I also examine Korine's segment within James Franco's art installation *Rebel,* which again prominently features images of Shakur. At the end of Chapter Three, I briefly address Riff Raff, the white joke-rapper on which James Franco's Alien character is arguably based. Looking at his comedic persona, I suggest that Riff Raff mocks hip-hop culture in an attempt to gain money and fame.

Chapter 4: Spring Breakers

Chapter Four is a close examination of *Spring Breakers*, especially Korine's portrayal of African Americans in the film. Focusing on three specific scenes, I analyze Korine's stereotypical representations of Blacks. I suggest that due to the legacy of slavery, whites like Korine and James Franco are able to appropriate historically Black aesthetics with impunity. Looking closely at the characters played by Gucci Mane and James Franco, I attempt to show that *Spring Breakers* is a representaion of modern day minstrelsy.

Chapter 5: Conclusion

The final chapter offers a conclusion of *Spring Breakers*, including an assessment of James Franco's own review of the film. This chapter highlights areas that I overlooked in *Spring Breakers* and offers recommendations for future scholars' work. For example, I believe much more work can be done on hipster racism. Quentin Tarantino and the hip-hop group Das Racist would be good starting points. After this brief tangent, I summarize all of my findings in this thesis.

BIOGRAPHY

Born in California, but raised in Nashville and New York City, Korine made his breakthrough into the film industry as a 19 year-old, while skateboarding in Washington Square Park. It was there he met photographer Larry Clark, who subsequently commissioned him to write a screenplay about disenfranchised, drug-addled New York City adolescents and the AIDS crisis. The resulting film was the NC-17 rated *KIDS* (1995), which was marketed as "A Wake-Up Call to the World." A deeply disturbing film, *KIDS* became a cult classic and set Korine on a path to become a world-renowned filmmaker. *KIDS* caught the attention of producer Cary Woods, who raised $1 million for *Gummo* (1997), Korine's debut as a writer-director.

After *Gummo* and the subsequent Dogme '95 sensation *julien donkey-boy* (1999), Korine had a difficult time acclimating to celebrity. Aside from short films, Korine did not work for almost eight years. Two of his homes burned down under mysterious circumstances, and his teeth began to fall out. Addicted to crack cocaine and heroin, he lived an itinerant life, moving from Paris, London, Panama, and then Nashville, where he met his wife Rachel in 2004. Since then, he has directed three features: *Mister Lonely* (2007), *Trash Humpers* (2009), and this year's *Spring Breakers* (2013).

FILMMAKING INFLUENCES

As a child in the late 1970s, Korine admired the work of Al Jolson, W.C. Fields, and Buster Keaton. Korine described *Fight Harm*, his 1999 project that involved Korine picking fights with strangers on the streets of New York, as "high comedy, like Buster

Keaton."[5] Partially directed by Korine's friend, magician David Blaine, the project was abandoned after nine fights, two stints in jail, and several trips to the hospital. While speaking to John Waters at the 2013 Provincetown Film Festival, Korine explained, "I was trying to make the funniest film ever […] I was trying to tap into Al Jolson or something."[6]

Korine's parents were extremely eccentric, as his mother was a magician's assistant and "[his father] was very much into circus clowns and children who rode bulls."[7] Growing up, Korine watched his father edit documentaries for a PBS series called "Southbound." Korine decided to be a filmmaker when he was 13 years old; before that he wanted to be a tap dancer, which explains why tap dancing is featured so regularly in his work.

Figure 1.1 – 1.2: *A tap dance by Harmony Korine* (circa 2001) – Uploaded to Youtube by Lithuanian filmmaker Jonas Mekas. Before Korine begins to dance, he mentions the Nicholas Brothers and Busby Berkeley.

5 Charlie Fox. "In Search of Harmony Korine," *Frieze Publishing*. 12 April 2013.

6 Harmony Korine. Interview with John Waters. "John Waters and Harmony Korine in Provincetown, Part 5." Web. 7 Sep. 2013.

7 Geoffrey Macnab. "Harmony Korine: Moonshine Maverick." *American Independent Cinema*. (London: I.B. Tauris, 2005) 198.

Figure 1.3 – 1.4: *Curb Dance* (2011) – Two stills from *Curb Dance*. Ten years go by, and Korine is still making tap dancing shorts. A voiceover plays throughout *Curb Dance*, with lines such as "One day it will rain down tap shoes, tap shoes all over the Earth."

For a period of time, Harmony lived in an artistic commune with his parents in northern California, which likely was the impetus for *Mister Lonely,* a film penned by Harmony and his younger brother Avi. According to Korine, his parents currently reside in the Panamanian jungle. In addition to his parents' influences, Korine was particularly struck by the work of German film pioneer Werner Herzog. Korine has said, "In [Herzog's] work more than anyone's, I identify with the filmmaking style and also the characters, and his approach to story-telling."[8] In return, Herzog praised Korine's *Gummo*, and years later starred in *julien donkey-boy* and *Mister Lonely*. Herzog once famously described Korine as "the last foot soldier of cinema."

Korine describes British filmmaker Alan Clarke as an enormous influence. He was particularly struck by Clarke's film, *Elephant* (1989). Shot using long tracking shots and a steadicam, *Elephant* portrays sixteen consecutive executions. In a 1997 conversation with contemporary artist Mike Kelly, Korine says, "You know who I love and who no one really knows about? Alan Clarke, the British director. He's a real

8 Harmony Korine. *The Confession of Julien Donkey-Boy,* New Line Home Video. 1999. DVD.

influence […] I was watching *Elephant (1989)*, and in the beginning it was a little disturbing. And then I started to find humor in the repetition – watching some Indian car washer get his hand blown out on a squeegee."[9] From this quote, we see Korine's perverse sense of humor, and also where he got the idea for *Fight Harm*, his unfinished film about getting repeatedly beaten up in New York. Additionally, it makes sense that Clarke would be an influence on Korine, given Clarke's propensity for using non-actors, non-narrative structure, and a documentary style.

FILMOGRAPHY

KIDS (1995) and *Ken Park* (2002)

Less time is devoted to these two Larry Clark films, as Korine had limited input after writing the screenplays. After Clark read Korine's *KIDS* script and before *KIDS* went into production, Korine wrote a lesser-known script for Clark entitled *Ken Park* (2002). Although *KIDS* received some positive reviews from critics and scholars, *Ken Park* was generally dismissed as exploitive. *Ken Park* tells the story of four teenaged skateboarders who grow up in dysfunctional households. The teenagers are disaffected youths living in suburbia. One character kills his grandparents; another sleeps with his girlfriend's mother, and two others are abused by domineering fathers. The film had trouble getting distribution and is currently banned in Australia. Based on Clark's short stories, *Ken Park* contains unsimulated sex scenes and gratuitous violence. In interviews, Korine winces at any mention of the film.

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9 Mike Kelly, "From the archives: Mike Kelly Interviews Harmony Korine." *Filmmaker Magazine*. Web. 13 February 2012.

***Gummo* (1997)**

Korine's directorial debut focuses on the aftermath of a tornado that ravaged the town of Xenia, Ohio in 1974. Alternating between hand-held and traditional camera set-ups, while using High 8, 16mm, VHS, and Polaroid cameras, Korine and cinematographer Jean-Yves Escoffier paint a collage-like portrait of the town's impoverished inhabitants. Although the film is a series of intertwined vignettes, *Gummo* focuses mostly on Solomon and Tummler killing stray cats; Dot, Helen, and Darby searching for their lost cat "Foot-Foot," and Bunny Boy finding his sexuality – what Jeffrey Sconce sums up as an overall "quest for pussy."[10] With extremely salacious material, including Solomon and Tummler having sex with a prostitute with Down's syndrome, the MPAA gave the film an NC-17 rating for "nihilism."

Much like *KIDS*, which focused on bored youths wreaking havoc in New York City, *Gummo* depicts youths trying to cope with empty, destitute lives. Geoffrey Macnab speculates that Korine's inspiration for the film "comes as much from Bunuel's *Los Olvidados* and Hector Babenco's *Pixote* as from Hollywood teen pics."[11] Although there are comedic scenes throughout, the despair of the characters is palpable. Despite Baltimore Sun critic Frank Scheck describing the film as "one of the most repellent cinematic efforts in recent memory,"[12] *Gummo* received critical acclaim from Werner Herzog, Jean-Luc Godard, Errol Morris, Bernardo Bertolucci, and Gus Van Sant. The film confounded critics and scholars alike. Sconce asks, "Is this an exploitation film or art

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10 Jeffrey Sconce. "Indecipherable Films: Teaching *Gummo*," *Cinema Journal*, Vol. 47, No.1. Autumn 2007: 114.
11 Geoffrey Macnab. "Harmony Korine: Moonshine Maverick." *American Independent Cinema*. (London: I.B. Tauris, 2005) 195.
12 Ibid.

cinema, a voyeuristic mocking of Red State otherness or the sympathetic intervention of a consecrated avant-gardist"?[13] I am inclined to side with the notion that Korine's direction is very much in jest. As Macnab astutely points out, "the title itself suggests that the writer-director is not entirely in earnest. Gummo was the little-known Marx brother."[14] Also, Tummler is a vaudevillian term, meaning low-level comedian.

***julien donkey-boy* (1999)**

Korine's Dogme '95 film centers on the schizophrenic Julien and his dysfunctional family. Created by a collective of Danish film directors in 1995, the Dogme '95 movement was a political response to cinematic globalization, essentially an attempt by Thomas Vinterberg and Lars Von Trier to level the playing field for small European nations. It is no wonder the anti-Hollywood Korine joined this movement. The Dogme '95 rules were:

1. Shooting must be done on location. Props and sets must not be brought in.
2. The sound must never be produced apart from the images or vice versa.
3. The camera must be hand-held.
4. The film must be in color. Special lighting is not acceptable.
5. Optical work and filters are forbidden.
6. The film must not contain superficial action (Murders, weapons, ect. Must not occur).
7. Temporal and geographical alienation are forbidden. (That is to say that the film takes place here and now.)
8. Genre movies are not acceptable.
9. The film format must be Academy 35 mm.

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13 Jeffrey Sconce. "'Trashing' the academy: taste, excess, and an emerging politics of cinematic style." *Screen*. 36:4 Winter 1995.114.

14 Geoffrey Macnab. "Harmony Korine: Moonshine Maverick." *American Independent Cinema*. (London: I.B. Tauris, 2005) 195.

10. The director must not be credited. [15]

As Berys Gaut explains, "Firstly, Dogma's concern is to show how the world really looks and sounds."[16] According to the Dogme Vow of Chastity, the directors' supreme goal is "to force the truth out of [the] characters and settings."[17] Bordering on cinema verite, Dogma '95 is an attempt at creating heightened realism. Speaking specifically about Von Trier's *The Idiots* (1998), Murray Smith writes, "The style of film evokes the direct cinema documentary tradition, most obviously through its use of hand-held camerawork and dependence on available light."[18] Korine's *julien donkey-boy* elicits a similar aesthetic, although it has an even grainier look, as Korine filmed it on Mini DV, transferred it to 16mm, then blew it up to 35mm.

In an effort to achieve this heightened level of realism, Korine placed hidden cameras on his actors and crewmembers in order to surreptitiously capture bystanders' genuine reactions. Korine says, "I had this idea that maybe the actors could be wearing hidden cameras, like spy cameras on their clothing, and I could send them into real situations, without people knowing they were being filmed I could kind of steal something. I could steal something real, or something that seems truthful."[19] A climactic scene when Julien brings his dead baby on a public bus yielded particularly visceral reactions from strangers.

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15 Mette Hjort and Scott MacKenzie. *Purity and Provocation: Dogma 95*. (London: British Film Institute, 2003) 200 – 201.
16 Ibid, 90.
17 Ibid, 200.
18 Ibid, 113 – 114.
19 Harmony Korine. *The Confession of Julien Donkey-Boy*. New Line Home Video. 1999. DVD.

Figure 1.5: *julien donkey-boy* – A hidden camera on Pearl's jacket recorded this footage of a store clerk.

Figure 1.6: *julien donkey-boy* – Crewmembers' hidden cameras capture this man eying Julien suspiciously, as Julien clutches his dead baby.

***Mister Lonely* (2007)**

After an eight-year hiatus, a sober Korine returned to feature-length film production with *Mister Lonely*. Of Korine's oeuvre, this film most closely resembles a studio film. Starring Diego Luna as Michael Jackson and Samantha Morton as Marilyn Monroe, *Mister Lonely* tells the story of a group of celebrity impersonators living together in a commune. Werner Herzog stars in a subplot involving skydiving nuns, and a young Rachel Korine plays Little Red Riding Hood. Produced by French fashion designer Agnes B. and co-written by Korine and his brother, the film received mixed

reviews. Much like *julien donkey-boy*, *Mister Lonely* begins and ends with the same images.


<u>Figures 1.5 – 1.6: *Mister Lonely*</u> – The first shot of *Mister Lonely* is a 155 seconds long. It features Diego Luna's character riding a child's moped with a stuffed monkey on a string. Bobby Vinton's "Mister Lonely" plays soothingly. The very last shot of the film is nearly identical, and it lasts 40 seconds. Here again we hear soothing sounds - this time it is the sound of nuns singing and water crashing against a shore.


***<u>Figure 1.7 – 1.8: julien donkey-boy</u>* – In a similar vein, *julien donkey-boy* begins and ends with similar shots. Both shots are of a figure skater. The first is a 47 second-long shot, accompanied by opera singer Renata Scotto's beautiful "Gianni Schicchi." The last sequence of the film, which is actually comprised of 2 shots (although the cut is hardly noticeable), lasts 97 seconds. Again, the non-diegetic music is Renata Scotto's "Gianni Schicchi."**

***Trash Humpers* (2009)**

Directly after making a relatively accessible film, Korine made his least-accessible film to date. Like his previous work, this non-narrative film follows a nihilistic group of lower class, suburban miscreants. Shot on worn VHS videotape in a pseudo-documentary style, with tap dancing sequences and characters breaking the fourth wall, *Trash Humpers* is an experimental film that features no known-actors other than Rachel Korine, who was unknown at the time. Much like *Gummo*, it is often hard to distinguish

between scripted and improvised scenes, and Korine goes out of his way to shock and provoke. Korine says that the film was partly edited while he was blindfolded; however, the veracity of this claim is questionable.

SCHOLARS ON KORINE

Until *Spring Breakers*, which Sarah Nicole Prickett describes as "the most written about cultural product of 2013,"[20] there has not been a large body of work on Korine's racial representations. Most of the scholarly work on Korine has focused on either his filmic method – use of improvisation, non-actors, disregard for continuity editing, and other avant-garde filmmaking techniques; or his portrayals of bored, dysfunctional, arguably nihilistic youths. To be sure, Korine's directorial debut, *Gummo*, and the follow-up Dogme '95 success *julien donkey-boy* have received the most attention.

Looking at *Gummo and julien donkey-boy,* film scholars Jeffrey Sconce and Robert Sklar examine Korines's filmic method. Sconce describes *Gummo* as a difficult film to teach, albeit one that introduces students to the possibilities of alternate forms of filmmaking. Sconce writes, "Much of *Gummo*'s productive 'difficulty' stems from Korine's devotion to Herzog – in particular, the promiscuous mixture of scripted and documentary forms, 'actors' and 'non-actors,' design and improvisation. After my most recent screening of the film, a student opened discussion by asking, "How much of that was 'real'?"[21] Scholars such as Sconce have been quick to point out how Korine's use of

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20 Sarah Nicole Prickett. "Spring Break Forever: Introduction." *The New Inquiry*. 17 April 2013.

21 Jeffrey Sconce. "Indecipherable Films: Teaching *Gummo*," *Cinema Journal*, Vol. 47, No.1. Autumn 2007. 114.

non-actors and real footage, such as home movies and TV newsreels, give his films a touch of realism and show students alternative modes of filmmaking.

Likewise, Robert Sklar praises Korine's penchant for breaking cinematic norms. Citing Korine's out-of-focus shots, superimpositions, and collage-like use of Polaroids and Super-8 footage, Sklar proclaims, "Harmony Korine has done more to shake up our expectations for American independent film than any other filmmaker of the 1990s."[22] Sklar was particularly impressed with Korine's frequent use of a "sound/image contrast," by which Korine juxtaposes relatively calm visuals with violent music. "In *Gummo,* otherwise bland or simply quirky scenes take on a darker tone when accompanied by songs such as "Hellish Blasphemy" and "Demonic Evil," performed by Nifelheim."[23] Similarly, we see this technique, albeit in reverse, in the Britney Spears montage from *Spring Breakers*. In this sequence, melancholic pop music plays while Alien and the girls embark on a violent rampage.

Figure 1.7: *Spring Breakers* – After the girls ask Alien to play "something sweet, something uplifting, something inspiring," he plays Britney Spears' "Everytime." A non-diegetic version of the actual Spears' song plays during a montage that intercuts between them singing and dancing in Alien's backyard and a string of violent robberies they commit. The montage lasts 3 minutes, 37 seconds - nearly the length of the entire Spears' song.

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22 Robert Sklar. "The Case of Harmony Korine," *The End of Cinema as We Know It*. ed. Jon Lewis. (New York: NYU Press, 2001) 268.

23 Ibid. 264.

<u>Figures 1.8 – 1.15: *Spring Breakers*</u> – Eight consecutive shots from the Britney Spears' "Everytime" montage.

Both Sklar and Sconce view *Gummo* as a film that can excite students, especially those interested in alternate forms of storytelling. But, not everyone is a fan of his work; some U.S. critics labeled *Gummo* "the worst film of the year"[24] and "one of the most repellent cinematic efforts in recent history."[25] When they're not discussing his avant-

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24 Janet Maslin. "Cats, Grandma and Other Disposables." *New York Times*. 17 October 1997.

25 Geoffrey Macnab. "Harmony Korine: Moonshine Maverick." *American Independent Cinema* (London: I.B. Tauris, 2005) 198.

garde techniques, scholars have historically dwelled on Korine's portrayals of disaffected youth culture and disenfranchised, nihilistic groups.

Danny Leigh and Tom Austin O'Connor focus on Korine's portrayal of disenfranchised youths. Citing Korine's "unflinching eye for the extremities of human behavior,"[26] Danny Leigh compares the filmmaker to shock-artists Nan Goldin, Tracy Emin, and Larry Clark. Like these artists, Korine focuses on disenfranchised communities wallowing in amoral worlds filled with drug abuse, incest, and other vices. Leigh writes, "Each [of these artists] has built a reputation on an often semi-voyeuristic commitment to the dark side of urban existence, on portraits of low ebbs and getting high, of black eyes and bad company."[27] With *KIDS, Gummo,* and *Spring Breakers*, Korine focuses on dysfunctional youths who turn to violence and drugs out of boredom. Korine says, "I know from growing up, the way I lived, the things I've seen, that all that kind of dysfunction and messed-up living comes out of boredom." In the same vein, *julien donkey-boy* is also filled with bored, "marginalized, stutteringly incoherent people"[28] who abuse drugs and engage in violence.

Much like Leigh, Tom Austin O'Connor writes about Korine's propensity to focus on disenfranchised characters, but he places the blame on the characters' surroundings. O'Connor writes, "[Korine's] characters' alienation arise primarily from their environments, which are saturated with poverty, racism, domestic violence, animal

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26 Danny Leigh. "The Beat-Up Kid," *American Independent Cinema*. British Film Institute, 2001. 200.
27 Ibid.
28 Ibid, 203.

abuse, environmental pollution, sexual assault, lack of nutrition, addiction, ect."[29] O'Connor refuses to characterize the kids in *Gummo* as nihilistic, and he posits that the characters find creative ways to overcome their challenging socio-economic status. "What rescues many of the characters from hopelessness is their *imaginations* (a la cinema of poetry), which they use to stage their own sporting events, comedy shows, and so forth."[30] Some characters in *Gummo* do indeed cope with hopelessness through comedy and tap dancing.

Figure 1.16: *Gummo* – After sleeping with a prostitute with Down's syndrome, Tummler performs a stand-up routine for the girl's brother / pimp. Shot from a low angle, Tummler is framed in a position of power. With ragtime music playing in the background, he stands 'on a soapbox' and makes jokes such as, "Another man came up to me and said he hadn't eaten in a week. I said, 'don't worry, it tastes the same.'" This is a good example of a character staging a comedy show to deal with dire life conditions. Speaking about this scene in a 1997 conversation with Mike Kelley, Korine says, "There's a whole vaudeville subtext. Kids in Dio t-shirts doing Jimmy Durante routines. That stand-up comedy routine Tummler does on the glass table after he goes with the whore – that's like a Henny Youngman monologue."[31]

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29 Tom Austin O'Connor. "Genre-%!$?ing: Harmony Korine's Cinema of Poetry." *Wide Screen*. Vol. 1, Issue 1, April 2009. 1.

30 Ibid, 9.

31 Mike Kelly, "From the archives: Mike Kelly Interviews Harmony Korine." *Filmmaker Magazine*. Web. 13 February 2012.

Figure 1.17: *Gummo* – After confessing that she misses her husband and attempting to console her despondent son, Solomon's mother breaks into a tap dance performance. With Solomon lifting forks in the foreground and his mother tap dancing in the background, it is clear they both are undergoing a parallel cathartic exercise of sorts. Tap dancing is a frequent motif in Korine's work.

KORINE ON KORINE

In an interview with *City Beat*'s Steve Ramos, Korine says, "There's no such thing as realism in film or there's no such thing as truth. I'm only concerned with the poetry of realism, a supposed realism, and that is what *Gummo* is…. Everything seems like it's really happening but at the same time I'm tricking and I'm manipulating everything. It's made up. I'm genre fucking."[32] Although Korine is referring to *Gummo,* this manipulation could easily apply to *Trash Humpers* or *julien donkey-boy*. In all three of these films, Korine purposely makes the viewer wonder what is real and what has been manipulated.

In addition to playing with notions of veracity, Korine attempts to create images that have not been seen before. If we can believe what he says, Korine makes films in

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32 Tom Austin O'Connor. "Genre-%!$?ing: Harmony Korine's Cinema of Poetry." *Wide Screen*. Vol. 1, Issue 1, April 2009. 7.

order to fill a void in contemporary American cinema. After *Gummo*, Korine explained, "Like Bresson has said: if there's no image that existed before that you'd want to see, then you create your own image. That's kind of a self-fulfilling prophecy of sorts. To me, there [weren't] those images, so I made them."[33] In a similar vien, at the 1999 Venice Film Festival, Korine said:

> When I work on an idea, my aim is to create something innovative. Cinema is all pretty much the same, with the exception of a few, such as Godard, Fassbinder or Cassavetes. Film is still in its infancy. I make movies because no one has made a film that I'd like to see at the cinema. I'm 25, I've got my own syntax. Why would I relate to films by Scorsese? My myths are David Lynch and Michael Powell.[34]

Alright, so let's explore Korine's syntax.

KORINE'S AESTHETICS

European Collaboration

A champion of the avant-garde, Korine often collaborates with Europeans on his films. Aside from *Trash Humpers*, which Korine photographed, all of his films have had European directors of photography. Jean-Yves Escoffier (France) was responsible for the cinematography in *Gummo;* Benoit Debie (France) shot *Spring Breakers; Mister Lonely* was shot by Marcel Zyskind (Denmark), and *julien donkey-boy* was shot by British cinematographer Anthony Dod Mantle and edited by Icelandic editor Valdis Oskardottir, both of whom worked on Thomas Vinterberg's *Festen* (1998).

Speaking about *Gummo* in November 2000, Korine explicitly states that he prefers working with Europeans. "Jean-Yves Escoffier, the cinematographer was very

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[33] Ibid, 3.
[34] Ibid,11.

much my partner in this movie […] because he's French, he was definitely my first choice."[35] Incidentally, in 1997 Escoffier shot both *Gummo* and *Good Will Hunting*, the Gus Van Sant film in which Korine had a small cameo. In addition to casting European crewmembers, Korine helmed the first, and most respected American Dogma '95 film: *julien donkey-boy*. As I mentioned before, Dogme '95 was an independent film movement that required location shooting, live-recorded sound, handheld cameras, and almost no artificial lighting.

Multiple Forms of Media: Art as Communal Collage

Whether he's painting, writing a novel, creating an art installation, or shooting a film, Korine uses multiple forms of media. In regard to filmmaking, Korine once said, "I think film ought to be like collage,"[36] and by using 16mm, Polaroid, VHS, and Hi-8 cameras, Korine was able to achieve just that effect with his first film. Korine explains, "When making *Gummo*, the idea was to give cameras to as many people as I could. Give a Super-8 camera to my sister; give a Polaroid to my best friend, and just tell them this is what I want, this is what I'm aiming for – just go out there and shoot it, bring it back to me and I'll make sense of these moments."[37] Reluctant to storyboard or rely on a screenplay, Korine opts instead to shoot raw material with different media, and then figure the project out during post-production.

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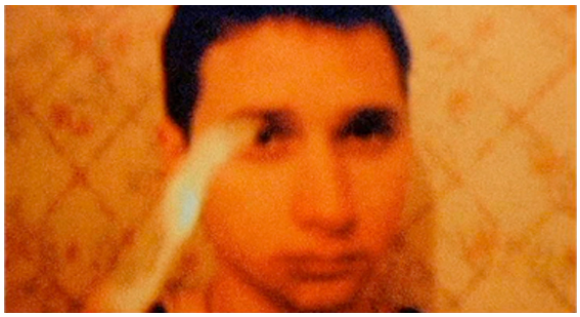
35 Harmony Korine. "Animated Photo Gallery with Commentary with Director Harmony Korine." *Gummo*. New Line Home Video. 1997. DVD.

36 Geoffrey Macnab. "Harmony Korine: Moonshine Maverick." *American Independent Cinema*. (London: I.B. Tauris, 2005) 198.

37 Amy Taubin. "Harmony Korine in Conversation with Amy Taubin," *The Brooklyn Rail*. July-Aug. 2008. Web. 16 July 2008.

To put it mildly, Korine does not want his films to look like mainstream Hollywood cinema. Referring to *julien donkey-boy,* Robert Sklar writes, "(Korine and director of photography Anthony Dod Mantle) utilize superimpositions, gradations of graininess in the image, out-of-focus shots, varying color tones, and still frame images to make the film far more adventurous visually than any previous Dogme-certified work."[38]

Figure 1.18: *julien donkey-boy* – Here we see a still image of Chris (Evan Neumann) holding a knife to his neck after his maladjusted father (Werner Herzog) has tormented him. Korine often will take a photograph or a still frame image, then scratch out the subject's eyes. We see this in *Gummo* as well.



Figures 1.19-1.20: *julien donkey-boy* – A few shots later, we see another still frame image of Chris. Then a cut to another still frame of Chris, in a different color tone.

38 Robert Sklar. "The Case of Harmony Korine," *The End of Cinema as We Know It*. ed. Jon Lewis. (New York: NYU Press, 2001) 267-8.

Figure 1.21: *julien donkey-boy* – And then we cut to a beautiful monochromatic, hand-held camera shot of Pearl (Chloe Sevigny) walking through a field of grain. This sequence shows Korine's propensity to use multiple forms of media (still images and moving film), and also how he likes to juxtapose disparate images. In this sequence, we see Chris mutilating himself, and then Pearl singing a religious hymn.

In addition to still frame images, photographs, and moving film, Korine and his directors of photography use various film stock and lighting techniques to achieve different looks. Sklar continues, "For *Gummo*, Escoffier's shooting style and lighting technique had the capacity to impart a romantic mystery to scenes of otherwise mundane realism, and complimented Korine's collage-like use of Polaroid still images and blown-up Super-8 footage that the director himself had shot."[39] We see this technique throughout *julien donkey-boy* as well.

Use of Non-Actors

In an attempt to achieve a heightened sense of realism, Korine tends to cast non-actors in his films. Korine has stated, "I have almost no interest in actors. If I wrote a

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39 Robert Sklar. "The Case of Harmony Korine," *The End of Cinema as We Know It*. Ed. Jon Lewis. (New York: NYU Press, 2001) 265.

script about someone who fights alligators, I'd rather find the person who would fight the alligator for real than ask Tom Hanks to play the part."[40] Korine's directorial debut *Gummo* only contained four professional actors. While casting the film, Korine and his crewmembers approached random people in Nashville, and two of the main characters, Solomon and Tummler, were cast after Korine saw them on an episode of Sally Jesse Raphael, entitled "My Child Died from Sniffing Glue."[41]

Much like *Gummo,* Korine cast non-actors in *julien donkey-boy*; however, this time he also used industry professionals, including Werner Herzog, Ewen Bremner, and Korine's then girlfriend Chloe Sevigny. Korine initially wanted to cast his schizophrenic uncle as the lead. As he explains, "I wanted to show the horror of schizophrenia […] I wanted to cast my uncle, but we couldn't get him out of the mental institute."[42] Most of the scenes were photographed in the home where his uncle grew up in, and Korine's grandmother plays a prominent character in the film.

Improvisation

In all of his films, Korine encourages his actors to improvise. As Korine told Amy Taubin in 2008, "I never understood directors who work with storyboards and who stick to the scripts."[43] With a loose idea of what he wants, Korine conveys his concept to the actors, and then gives them free reign with dialogue. Korine explains, "*Gummo* was like

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40 Geoffrey Macnab. "Harmony Korine: Moonshine Maverick." *American Independent Cinema*. (London: I.B. Tauris, 2005) 196.

41 Tom Austin O'Connor. "Genre-%!$?ing: Harmony Korine's Cinema of Poetry." *Wide Screen*. Vol. 1, Issue 1, April 2009. 10.

42 Harmony Korine. *The Confession of Julien Donkey-Boy*. New Line Home Video.1999. DVD.

43 Amy Taubin. "Harmony Korine in Conversation with Amy Taubin," *The Brooklyn Rail*. July-Aug. 2008. Web. 16 July 2008.

50/50 in that there was a script and 50 percent of what you saw on screen had been written. The other 50 percent was completely improvised around an idea or something that was still connected to what was written."[44]

His second film, *julien donkey-boy*, was even less scripted than *Gummo*. Korine says, "*julien* was 20 pages long and had almost no dialogue written – it was more like a synopsis of what could happen."[45] When actors work with the mercurial director, they understand that anything is subject to change at any moment. Chloe Sevigny, who acted in *KIDS*, *Gummo*, and *julien donkey-boy* said, "With Harmony, you're always surprised everyday you come to the set. You may have a list of scenes…to do for that day, and he'll throw them all out and say those scenes aren't in the movie anymore. We're going to do this, that, and the other thing instead."[46] By not relying on a script, Korine's strategy is to shoot a lot of footage, often with different cameras, and then try to make the project come to fruition in post-production. In regard to *julien donkey-boy*, Korine says, "I wasn't really worried about the story or the plot while I was shooting because I knew that if I shot enough, I could make it work in the editing room."[47]

Also, in order to get more authentic performances, Korine will occasionally put actors in situations where they are genuinely uncomfortable. As an example, while filming *Spring Breakers,* Korine purposely didn't tell Selena Gomez about a scene where Alien (James Franco) makes sexual advances toward her until minutes before the shoot. Korine kept the scene a secret in order to get a more visceral reaction from Gomez.

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44 Ibid.
45 Ibid.
46 Harmony Korine. *The Confession of Julien Donkey-Boy*. New Line Home Video. 1999. DVD.
47 Ibid.

Figure 1.22: *Spring Breakers* – In this handheld close-up, Faith (Gomez) and Alien (Franco) are in focus, while a menacing African American man smokes in the background. I will address this scene in greater depth in Chapter 4.

Preference for An Alternative Narrative Structure

Korine finds the traditional three-act structure to be inhibiting. He says, "Since Griffith until now I think film has gone in one narrative direction, and… for me it's important to start to start to tell stories in a different way."[48] Additionally, Korine suggests that the traditional three-act structure isn't reflective of real life.

> I don't see narrative in life. I see stories, and I love stories, but I don't see anything ever beginning or finishing; I don't feel like there's a middle to anything in my life, so I'd just rather show scenes and things that exist […] I could care less about narrative. I think story is essential and characters are both essential, but as far as just putting something in order, I think that's just something that's been done for the past 100 years and been accepted. I'm not interested.[49]

That not withstanding, I would suggest that there are often "middles" within the stories he tells. Korine's films are often composed of a series of vignettes, which do, in fact,

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48 Harmony Korine. *The Confession of Julien Donkey-Boy*. New Line Home Video.1999. DVD.

49 Harmony Korine. "Animated Photo Gallery with Commentary with Director Harmony Korine." *Gummo*. New Line Home Video. 1997. DVD.

have traditional beginnings, middles, and ends. As an example, at the beginning of one of the storylines from *Gummo*, Dot, Helen, and Darby lose their pet cat. During the middle of this particular storyline, the three girls escape a sexual predator while looking for the cat, and then they discover their lost pet at the end. Nevertheless, it is clear that Korine strives for an alternative narrative structure.

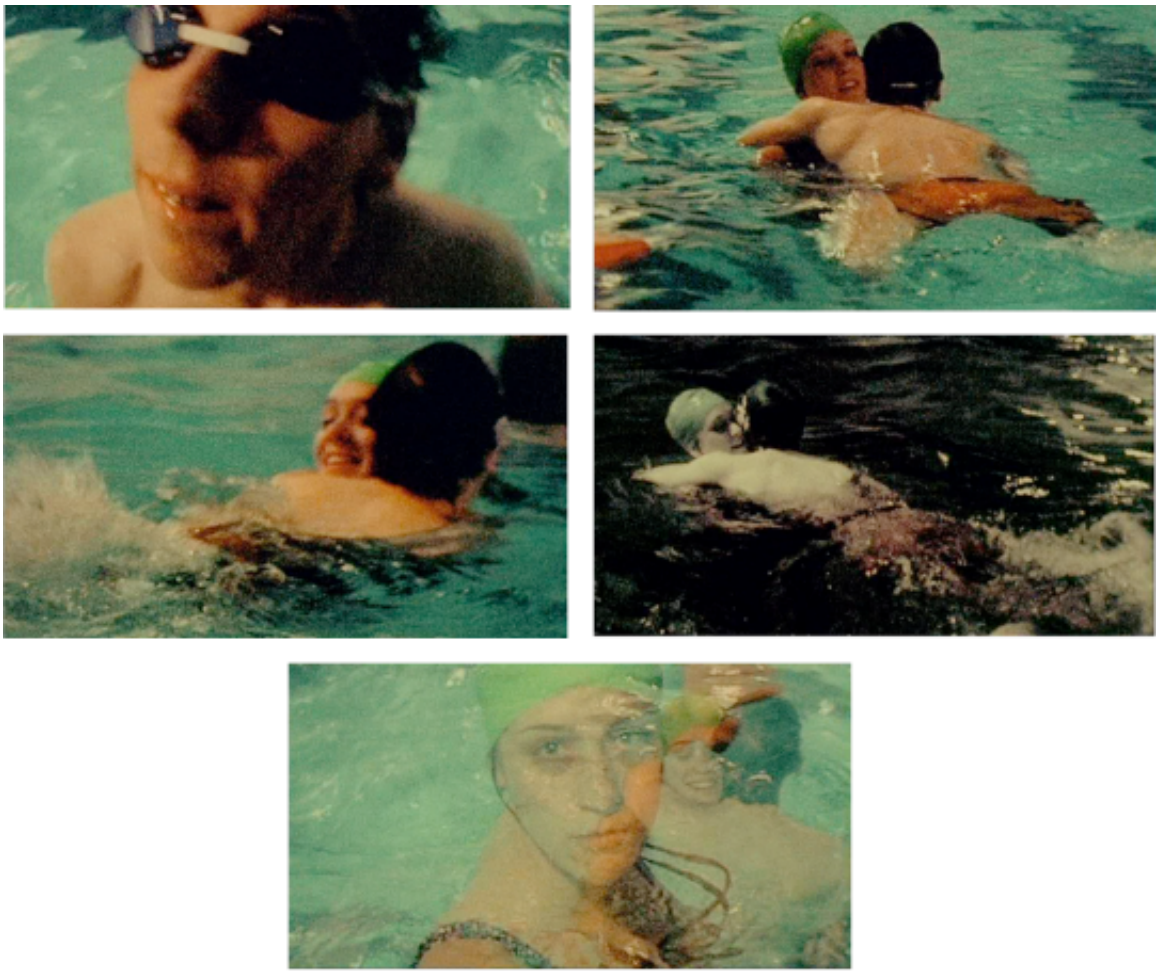
Resisting Continuity Editing

Influenced by the French New Wave, as well as John Cassavetes and Alan Clarke, Korine often breaks the basic rules of Hollywood continuity editing. In addition to breaking the fourth wall and using out-of-focus shots, Korine uses jump cuts.

Figures 1.23 – 1.24: *Gummo* – An inebriated (Korine) makes sexual advances on a homosexual, African American dwarf (Bryant Crenshaw). We see a jump cut between these two shots. Korine went to grade school with Bryant.

Korine also frequently uses superimpositions. Generally speaking, he will superimpose close up shots of characters with an image of their thoughts. We see this technique in *julien donkey-boy*, as well as *Mister Lonely*.

Figure 1.25: *julien donkey-boy* – In the foreground, we see Julien watching Chris and his father, who are racing in the background.



Figures 1.26 – 1.30 *julien donkey-boy* – With frenetic jump cuts, changes in color, and finally the superimposition in 1.30, this five shot sequence illustrates the fragmentation of Julien's schizophrenic mind.

By using superimpositions, Korine provides a more nuanced image. He often juxtaposes a close-up of a character's face with a medium or long shot of what they are thinking about. We see this technique in both *julien donkey-boy* and *Mister Lonely*.

Figure 1.31: *julien donkey-boy* – After Father (Herzog) drinks cold medicine, Korine cuts to Father's rambling, nondiegetic monologue, which is ostensibly about Pizarro, Almagro, and the aftermath of the Spanish conquest of Peru. For 89 seconds, we see Father's face superimposed over an image of Father and Chris walking down the sidewalk. Presumably, Father is at war with Chris, much like Pizarro was at war with Almagro.

Figure 1.32: *Mister Lonely* – A close-up of Father Umbrillo's (Herzog) wistful monologue morphs into a sequence of flying nuns. When Father Umbrillo asks, "How it is possible that a nun can fly?" we see his thoughts onscreen. The close-up shot of Umbrillo against the red background lasts for 40 seconds; then we see a superimposition of both Umbrillo and the flying nuns for 36 seconds, followed by a sequence of the flying nuns.

Additionally, Korine is not afraid to reuse the same exact shots repeatedly throughout his film. He does this in *Spring Breakers* in order to maintain the dreamlike nature of the

film. Korine wanted to achieve a liquid narrative, and he attempts this by repeating shots and dialogue.

Figures 1.33 – 1.35: ***Spring Breakers.***

Figures 1.36 – 1.39: ***Spring Breakers.***

Fascination with Deviance

All of Korine's films deal with deviant behavior in some capacity. As an example, *julien donkey-boy* tells the story of Julien, a schizophrenic who impregnates his sister. In this film, Julien's father (Herzog) wears a gas mask and drinks cough syrup out of a sandal. No topic is off-limits for Korine: incest, substance abuse, homophobia, vandalism, prostitution, mental illness, and animal cruelty are all fair game.

THEORY AND METHODOLOGY

This thesis does not focus on Korine's portrayal of disenfranchised youths, nor does it dwell on his avant-garde techniques. That has all been done before. This thesis is a close look at how Korine uses racial stereotypes to achieve narrative economy, satirize hip-hop as a movement, and inadvertently marginalize Blacks. In order to perform a critical analysis of Korine's work, I employ a synthesis of neoformalism and representational analysis.

Representational Analysis

During my analysis, I will pay close attention to what Charles Ramirez-Berg describes as "the poetics of stereotyping."

Ramirez-Berg writes:

> The stereotypical image, the human stereotype, is the most obvious and prominent part of the stereotype, but it does not act alone. It is presented to the viewer along with a full array of stereotypical devices deployed at every cinematic register, everything from mise-en-scène to framing, from camera angles to shot duration, from set decoration to music and sound effects. These devices complement the

> image in crucial but nearly imperceptible ways and together help to create the complete stereotypical statement.[50]

By looking at framing, camera angles, shot selection, music, and speech patterns, I will ascertain how African Americans are portrayed in *Spring Breakers*. A few scholars have already started to do some work in this regard. For example, *New Yorker* film critic Richard Brody noted that during the film's climax, cinematographer Benoit Debie portrays the two girls "in a cinematographic version of blackface, with light bulbs (or digital effects) taking the place of minstrels' cork."[51] The girls are wearing pink masks, so the effect loses some potency; however, Brody's observation is astute nonetheless.

I agree with Ramirez-Berg that there is a financial incentive to propagate racial stereotypes, and I believe Korine falls into this trap. Rather than challenge racial stereotypes, Korine embraces them by portraying almost all the Blacks in *Spring Breakers* as drug dealers and social miscreants. As Ramirez-Berg explains, "Because [stereotypes] require little or no introduction or explanation, and because they are so quickly and completely comprehended as signs, stereotypes are an extremely cheap and cost-effective means of telling a movie story."[52] I will argue that this financial factor, combined with Korine's obsession with social deviance and a desire to shock, results in a negative portrayal of African Americans in *Spring Breakers*.

In fact, Korine's stereotypical representations of African Americans can be traced back to the 19th century. Referencing *Toms, Coons, Mulattoes, Mammies, and Bucks*,

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50 Charles Ramirez-Berg. *Latino Images in Film: Stereotypes, Subversion, & Resistance*. (Austin: University of Texas Press, 2002) 42.

51 Richard Brody. "The Life Lessons of 'Spring Breakers,'" *The NewYorker*. Web. 18 March 2013.

52 Charles Ramirez-Berg. *Latino Images in Film: Stereotypes, Subversion, & Resistance*. (Austin: University of Texas Press, 2002) 42.

Donald Bogle's seminal work on stereotypical character tropes, I will show how Korine relies on these very same tropes, especially the coon and buck tropes. According to Bogle, the coon is portrayed as an amusement object and a buffoon, and the buck is oversexed, savage, and violent. I will show that Korine's work is proof that these stereotypical portrayals still exist in contemporary film. In order to bolster my argument that Korine relies on stereotypes, I will engage in neoformalism, a rather empirical form of film analysis.

Neoformalism

Employing David Bordwell and Kristin Thomspon's neoformalist approach, I intend to take a close look at the formal patterns within *Spring Breakers*. As opposed to traditional film theory, which historically has focused on the work of Saussure, Lacan, Althusser, and Barthes – and what Bordwell has condescendingly termed SLAB theory – I will take Bordwell's more systematic approach. By identifying the specific shots, sounds, mise-en-scene, dialogue, costuming, and editing that Korine repeatedly employs, I hope to tap into the filmmaker's thematic and narrative intentions. I am particularly interested in how Korine depicts African Americans, and to this end, I will conduct systematic research. Where are they framed in the shot? How much dialogue are the African Americans granted? Is the dialogue audible? As Bordwell explains, "Systematic research consists of posing questions, reflecting on the historical factors that lead to the questions' becoming salient, broaching alternative answers, and weighing them in light of

evidence."[53] Writing for a skeptical reader, I will anticipate opposing viewpoints, as I try to provide enough evidence to support my arguments.

Regarding *Gummo,* Thomas Carl Wall proclaims, "A shot-by-shot analysis of the film will reveal very little."[54] I happen to believe a neoformalist analysis of *Gummo* would uncover a great deal of the filmmaker's techniques; however, I plan on focusing the bulk of this thesis on Korine's most recent work, *Spring Breakers*. In addition to the neoformalist and representational analyses, I will also incorporate the work of Black music scholars, hip-hop scholars, and critical race theorists. I intend to show how Korine builds upon a long history of white appropriation and commodification of African American aesthetics.

Appropriation and commodification of African American aesthetics

As Gena Caponi writes, "The idea of an African American aesthetic is controversial; to some the term sounds dangerously like a racial essentialism – a perpetuation and justification of outmoded notions of race."[55] However, Caponi continues, "The African American aesthetic is a set of techniques and practices – a technology of stylization – that recur over time and across different forms of cultural expression […] An aesthetic is a constellation of such traits, a set of factors that are not incidental, occasional, or ornamental but which serve as the foundation of an art form."[56]

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53 David Bordwell. "The Historical Poetics of Cinema." *The Cinematic Text: Methods and Approaches*. Ed. R. Barton Palmer. Georgia State Literary Studies, No.3. 387.
54 Thomas Carl Wall. "Dolce Stil Novo: Harmony Korine's Vernacular." *The New Centennial Review*. (East Lansing: Michigan State University Press. 2004) 307 – 321.
55 Gena Dagel Caponi. *signifyin(g), sancifyin', & slam dunking*. (Amherst, MA: University of Massachusetts Press, 1999) 7.
56 Ibid, 8.

Time and again, distinct forms of African American cultural expression, such as blues, jazz, R&B, and rap, have been appropriated and exploited by whites. Writing specifically about jazz, Scott Devereaux explains:

> To attain this transcendent universality, jazz must abandon its origins in a particular subculture. It must exchange an idiosyncratic provincialism ([jazz] stemmed from a specific social environment, originally conditioned by slavery, in which a group of people largely shut off from the white world developed highly personal cultural traits") for the abstractions of style and technique, available to all. Is this development both inevitable and welcome – a gift from black Americans to the world? Or is the exchange more sinister? Is it, in fact, an act of theft – yet another instance of the co-optation of black creativity in the interests of white hegemony that Amiri Baraka has called "the Great Music Robbery"?[57]

Not known to mince words, Baraka once famously asked, "What's the difference between [the] Beatles, [the] Stones, ect., and Minstrelsy? Minstrels never convinced anybody they were black either."[58] Baraka is essentially calling out the Rolling Stones and the Beatles for appropriating historically Black aesthetics; Baraka considered their appropriation to be cultural theft. "Commenting on the popularization of black idioms by these white artists, Carl Berz typically asserted that 'commercial exploitation made the Negro people who had grownup with the blues feel that their fundamental heritage had been wrenched from them."[59] In regard to blues, jazz, and rap, William Banfield says, "What began as authentic Black music and art conception became big business

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57 Scott Knowles DeVeaux. *The birth of bebop: a social and musical history*. (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1997) 19.

58 Amiri Baraka. *Black Music*. (New York: W. Morrow, 1967) 235.

59 Brian Ward. *Just My Soul Responding: Rhythm And Blues, Black Consciousness and Race Relations*. (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1998) 134.

dominated really by whites."[60] One of Banfield's principle concerns is "how Black identity and artistic voices and cultures have been mangled and maligned at the service of popular music commodification."[61]

By no means is hip-hop music an exception. Banfield describes hip-hop as "an inescapable Black aesthetic expression and worldview,"[62] and yet another artistic voice that has been corrupted by the white, commercial monster. Hip-hop, which grew out of comic narratives, R&B, gospel, and the Jamaican DJ tradition, became appropriated by white artists, watered down and commodified, much like blues music in the 1920s and R&B in the 1940s. Hip-hop music, which was once a medium and a megaphone for the disenfranchised gradually became yet another avenue for white music executives to make money off Black performers. According to the godfather of hip-hop culture, Afrika Bambaattaa, "Hip hop's real power and true significance […] resides in its capacity to empower young people to want to change their lives."[63] To many people, it appears that the power of hip-hop has subsided. No longer is hip-hop about empowering young people to change their lives. For the most part, today's hip-hop is about gangsterism, womanizing, and flaunting money earned through illegal means. Michael Eric Dyson writes,

> If there is a dominant perception about today's rap superstars among hip-hop purists, it is that they have squandered the franchise by being obsessed with shaking derrieres, platinum jewelry, fine alcohol, premium weed, pimp culture, gangster rituals, and thug life. Although hip-hop has succeeded far

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60 William Banfield. *Cultural Codes: Making of a Black Music Philosophy*. (Lanham, MD: Scarecrow Press, 2010) 173.
61 Ibid, 185.
62 Ibid, 37.
63 S. Craig Watkins. *Hip Hop Matters: Politics, Pop Culture, and the Struggle for the Soul of a Movement*. (Boston: Beacon Press, 2005) 22.

> beyond the Bronx of its birth, it has, in the minds of some of its most ardent guardians, lost its soul."[64]

In all likelihood, hip-hop's downward trajectory can be traced back to when music executives first recognized the immense financial and social implications of the genre.

Six years before *Gummo,* when Korine was all of 17 years old, gangsta rap group NWA released their studio album *Niggaz4Life* and the music industry rolled out Nielsen SoundScan, a much more accurate way to track album sales. "After 1991, the year SoundScan was introduced, there was growing recognition that hip hop's market was much wider and whiter than previously understood. […] After that June in 1991, corporate hip hop, though few would admit it, was manufactured first and foremost with young white consumers in mind."[65]

Now, although so many young suburban whites, like Korine (and myself), were becoming attuned to Black plight, it is unlikely that white consumption of rap music indicated that racism was on the decline. As Craig Watkins explains, "The reverse claim that white youth's fascination with hip hop did not reflect the declining significance of race but, rather, a more complex expression of racism was just as compelling and, in the end, more likely. Rap's crossover appeal represented a strange form of cultural tourism for many young whites."[66] Moreover, now that music studio heads were privy to the cash flow that rap music could bring, they began to pay attention to hip-hop, carefully packaging it and marketing it to a white audience. It is quite telling that those who controlled the purse strings, predominately white executives, promoted artists who rapped

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64 Michael Eric Dyson. *Holler if You Hear Me: Searching for Tupac Shakur*. (New York: Basic Civitas Books, 2001) 108.
65 S. Craig Watkins. *Hip Hop Matters: Politics, Pop Culture, and the Struggle for the Soul of a Movement*. (Boston: Beacon Press, 2005) 96.
66 Ibid, 97.

about hoes and handguns, rather than homelessness and helplessness. As a result, mainstream rap artists slowly stopped addressing police brutality, racial profiling, and other social inequities in their rhymes. Hip-hop essentially went from Public Enemy's "Fight the Power" to Snoop Dogg's "Gin and Juice." The white music industry essentially steered rap music in a particular direction.

As Banfield explains, "Codes of Black culture are being set and argued persuasively by a business-constructed identity,"[67] and this hegemonic, predominately white identity works actively to maintain the status quo. To be sure, white music executives are not using rap music as a vehicle for African American social mobility. "Much like black intellectuals of the 1920s, (KRS-One) argues that white-controlled businesses would rather promote tired black stereotypes."[68] The mainstream positioning of today's rap music supports narrow, essentialist notions of race. Contemporary rap stories have begun to sound increasingly similar. Additionally, by repeatedly suggesting that going to prison, dealing drugs, and engaging in violence is somehow "authentically Black," contemporary rap stories are harmful to Blacks. Jeffrey Ogbar mourns this insidious manifestation of the hegemonic music industry:

> "[…] that poverty is somehow more authentically black than being middle class echoes the perspectives of the larger, white community that demanded the exoticized, ghettoized Other […] the implications of (Wallace) Thurman's vision reflect essentialist notions that conflate class into the conceptualization of race, thereby upholding dominant narratives of race. Echoes of Thurman's position are found in hip-hop today, where poverty and a 'hood' life are

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67 William Banfield. *Cultural Codes: Making of a Black Music Philosophy*. (Lanham, MD: Scarecrow Press, 2010) 11.

68 Jeffrey Ogbar. *Hip-hop revolution: the culture and politics of rap*. (Lawrence: University Press of Kansas, 2007) 19.

> considered more authentically black than going to college."[69]

With contemporary rap music becoming a celebration of gangsterism, there is little opportunity for African American progress in the space. Ogbar writes, "The oversexed, violent, and misogynist tales that are passed off as ghetto realness have become an established marker for credibility as well as a racialized authenticity that conflates poverty, crime, misogyny, and all things ghetto."[70] So, why do African Americans participate in this charade if works so insidiously to maintain the status quo?

According to Mark Anthony Neal and Tricia Rose it is partly about self-preservation. "[…] Minstrel inflections are part of an attempt to cater to a larger, hostile white audience of hip-hop consumers […] ultimately Neal argues this tradition of pandering to offensive and narrow definitions of black authenticity for a [white] consumer market is about white expectations as well as black self-preservation…"[71] Since Korine is so heavily invested in hip-hop and African American aesthetics, I will discuss the work of hip-hop scholars Craig Watkins and Michael Eric Dyson again in Chapter 3.

Critical Race Theory

In addition to Black music theorists, I will address the work of critical race theorists Saidiya Hartman and Frank Wilderson. In *Scenes of Subjection*, Hartman's work on slavery and the legacy of slavery, Hartman puts forth a theory of fungibility: the idea

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69 Ibid, 25.

70 Ibid, 30.

71 Tricia Rose. *Black Noise: rap music and black culture in contemporary America*. (Hanover, NH: Wesleyan University Press, 1994) 32.

that whites appropriated (took on) the captive Black body for their enjoyment and self-exploration. Hartman writes:

> The fungibility of the commodity, specifically its abstractness and immateriality, enabled the black body or blackface mask to serve as the vehicle of self-exploration, renunciation, and enjoyment. Therefore, the ability to put on blackness must be considered in the context of chattel slavery and the economy of enjoyment founded thereupon. Antebellum formations of pleasure, even those of the North, need to be considered in relation to the affective dimensions of chattel slavery since enjoyment is virtually unimaginable without recourse to the back body and the subjection of the captive, the diversions engendered by the dispossession of the enslaved, or the fantasies launched by the myriad uses of the black body. For this reason the formal features of this economy of pleasure and the politics of enjoyment are considered in regard to the literal and figurative occupation and possession of the body.[72]

Put simply, Hartman contends that whites have taken "pleasure in securing the mechanisms of racial subjection."[73] Blackface and minstrelsy would be two forms of racial subjection, albeit rather innocuous forms compared to the untold horrors inflicted upon slaves. "By encouraging entertainment, the master class sought to cultivate hegemony, harness pleasure as a productive force, and regulate the modes of permitted expression."[74] Through minstrels and melodramas, the white ruling class maintained the status quo by performing Blackness and mocking Blacks. In later chapters, I will argue that we still see this today in Korine's work, and that this is, at least in part, due to the devastating legacy of slavery.

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72 Saidiya V. Hartman. *Scenes of Subjection: Terror, Slavery, and Self-Making in Nineteenth-Century America*. (New York: Oxford University Press, 1997) 26.
73 Ibid.
74 Ibid, 44.

Frank Wilderson writes, "[…] slavery is and connotes an ontological status for Blackness; and that the constituent elements of slavery are not exploitation and alienation but accumulation and fungibility (as Hartman puts it): the condition of being owned and traded."[75] As Wilderson explains, the legacy of slavery has had far reaching effects on generations of African Americans, and the side effects are certainly prevalent today. "The violence of the Middle passage and Slave estate, technologies of accumulation and fungibility, recompose and reenact their horrors on each succeeding generation of Blacks. This violence is both gratuitous (not contingent on transgressions against the hegemony of civil society) and structural (positioning Blacks ontologically outside of Humanity and civil society."[76] He continues, "as an accumulated and fungible object, rather than an exploited and alienated subject, the Black is openly vulnerable to the whims of the world, and so is his or her cultural 'production.'"[77] So, from this train of thought, one can attribute the cultural appropriation (theft) of hip-hop music and other Black cultural products to the legacy of slavery.

Wilderson and Hartman "meditate on the archaic persistence of two key ontological qualities of the legacy of slavery, namely, the condition of absolute captivity and the state of virtual noncommunication within official culture."[78] In Chapter 4, I will address this noncommunication. Summarizing Hartman, Wilderson says, "the violence-induced fungibility of Blackness allows for its appropriation by white psyches as

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75 Frank B. Wilderson. *Red, White, & Black: Cinema and the Structure of U.S. Antagonisms*. (Durham: Duke University Press, 2010) 14.
76 Ibid, 55.
77 Ibid, 56.
78 Frank B. Wilderson. *Red, White, & Black: Cinema and the Structure of U.S. Antagonisms*. (Durham: Duke University Press, 2010) 64.

'property of enjoyment.'"[79] During a 2003 conversation, Wilderson and Hartman discuss this "property of enjoyment," explaining that, in essence, "the slave's performance (dance, music, ect.) [was] the property of white enjoyment."[80] In regard to *Spring Breakers*, I will argue in Chapter 4 that "Alien" may be an Other within the White community, but his whiteness nonetheless allows him to freely appropriate Black performance.

Problematic Nature of Racial Satire

Lastly, I will look at the problematic nature of racial satire. As Rosa-Linda Fregoso explains, "In certain respects, the process of encoding particular social and cultural meanings onto images/language/sound does not correspond neatly with decoding strategies. Viewers may or may not get the point, so the problem of equivocation surfaces."[81] Comedians and filmmakers who attempt to use humor to undermine stereotypes sometimes find that they inadvertently reinforce the stereotypes. Dave Chappelle, in particular, has had a great deal of difficulty walking the line between exploding stereotypes and reinforcing them. As Bambi Haggins writes, "[…] Chappelle acknowledged the possible dangers inherent in comedy that challenges cultural, social, and political sensibilities and questioned whether his comedic discourse […] was becoming progressively more open to [mis]interpretation."[82] I include this section

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79 Ibid, 89.

80 Saidiya Hartman & Frank B. Wilderson. (2003) "The Position of the Unthought." *Qui Parle*. 13 (2): 188.

81 Rosa-Linda Fregoso. *Bronze Screen Chicana and Chicano Culture*. (Minnesota: University of Minnesota Press, 1993) 51.

82 Bambi Haggins. "In the Wake of 'The Ni**er Pixie' Dave Chappelle and the Politics of Crossover Comedy." *Satire TV: Politics and Comedy in the Post-Network Era*. (New

because I think it is important to acknowledge the counterargument to my thesis, which likely is the idea that Korine uses humor subversively to explode stereotypes.

Psychoanalysis: Korine's Psychological Need to Stereotype

Although Korine refuses to take an introspective look at his work, he definitely stands to gain a lot from stereotyping. Korine has admitted that he is fixated on Others, particularly the handicapped. Korine once told Bruce LaBruce, "I'm not a big believer in introspection. I don't really care to know much about myself or why I do the things I do. I just don't think I'll ever know. For some reason I've always just been drawn to a specific kind of person, handicapped."[83] Moreover, Korine has said repeatedly that he gets ideas for his films from his dreams. It is likely that on a subconscious level, stereotyping is fulfilling a need for Korine.

At this point in time, a very brief look at the psychology behind stereotyping may be fruitful. According to Russian philosopher Mikhail Baktin, "The *other* is necessary to accomplish…a perception of the self that the individual can achieve only partially with respect to himself."[84] As Robin Wood and others have argued, people stereotype in order to project their negative tendencies and fears onto Others. So, in a way, stereotyping reveals less about the stereotyped group and more about the stereotyper. Interestingly, Korine refuses to examine his own negative proclivities and fears, but yet he bases his films on his dreams and images that pop into his head.

York: NYU Press, 2009) 233 – 248. Ed. Jonathan Gray, Jeffrey P. Jones, Ethan Thompson. 234.

83 Harmony Korine. *Interview with Bruce LaBruce*. Kodak Lecture Series: Harmony Korine. Ryerson University, Toronto. Web. 1 April 2005.

84 Charles Ramirez-Berg. *Latino Images in Film: Stereotypes, Subversion, & Resistance*. (Austin: University of Texas Press, 2002) 28.

Continuing this psychoanalytical train of thought, "Dreams are the embodiment of repressed desires, wishes, tensions, and fears that the subconscious mind rejects."[85] If this is true, a filmmaker like Korine, one who uses dreams as a starting point in the filmmaking process, is clearly tapping into his subconscious. For the sake of discussion, let's assume Korine's films are essentially mediated dreams, an attempt to project his bad tendencies and fears onto Others while maintaining his good attributes. As Ramirez-Berg explains, this latent technique does not work. "The individual's projection of the bad and absorption of the good is never fully successful. The very attempt is an acknowledgement that good and evil coexist within the individual"[86] – which Korine readily acknowledges. In fact, Korine has a tattoo of an upturned red pitchfork featured prominently on his right hand. " 'It's the Devil. My diabolical side,' [he says] And on a finger on his left hand is an upside down cross. 'This, on the other hand, is an Angel. My good side.'"[87] From a psychoanalytical perspective, Korine's stereotyping seems to be an unsuccessful attempt to embrace his good side, while discarding his bad side. The fact that he bases his films on his dreams only seems to support this argument.

KORINE'S INCENDIARY FORM OF SATIRE | SHOCK VALUE

By casting dwarfs and non-actors with Down's syndrome, many have accused Korine of exploitation, an accusation that the director vehemently denies. In the extras on the *Gummo* DVD, a clearly inebriated Korine says," The idea of exploitation means absolutely nothing to me because I show what I want to see, and I don't exploit people. I

85 Ibid, 30.
86 Ibid, 31.
87 Domenico Monetti. "All Korine's Transgressions." *Venice Film Festival Review*. 7 September 1999.

don't make people do things they don't want to do. But also it's not an argument I care to fight or defend."[88] Tom Austin O'Connor does not believe that Korine is exploitive either; in fact, he thinks Korine portrays his characters in a compassionate manner. According to O'Connor, *Gummo* is a cinema of poetry, one that highlights the mainstream media's irrational fear of disabled and disenfranchised people. I am inclined to disagree with this assertion.

O'Connor writes, "During all of [*Gummo's* ethnographic portraits], we spectators become acutely aware of the fact that Korine is *not making fun of his characters* because only through an ideal media gaze would these characters become objects of mockery; this is elucidated by the fact that many reviewers like Janet Maslin in the *New York Times* cruelly and demandingly referred to Korine's cast as 'freakish individuals."[89] In regard to the two main characters, Tummler (Nick Sutton) and Soloman (Jacob Reynolds), O'Connor may have a point, as Korine did give them slightly more compassion than some traditional media outlets (i.e. the Sally Jessy Raphael Show) had previously. As O'Connor writes, "In line with the film's critique of the mass-media's denials and repressions, its two central protagonists were discovered on a Sally Jessy Raphael episode titled "My Child Died from Sniffing Glue."[90] Although I agree that Korine portrays those two characters' with some empathy, he definitely makes fun of handicapped secondary characters throughout the film.

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88 Harmony Korine. "Animated Photo Gallery with Commentary with Director Harmony Korine." *Gummo*. New Line Home Video. 1997. DVD

89 Tom Austin O'Connor. "Genre-%!$?ing: Harmony Korine's Cinema of Poetry." *Wide Screen*. Vol. 1, Issue 1, April 2009. 9.

90 Ibid.

Figure 1.40: *Gummo* – As she describes her taste in men, a secondary character with Down's syndrome dances to music in front of a muscle car.

Figure 1.41: *Gummo* – As the camera pans to Dot, Helen, and Darby, we see two deaf people gesticulating wildly and screeching like animals: another example of Korine poking fun at handicapped secondary characters.

Strangely, O'Connor also doesn't even find Korine's portrayals of disabled people in *julien donkey-boy* to be in jest. I find this to be a tough argument considering the film is called *julien donkey-boy,* which suggests that the schizophrenic title character is part boy, part donkey. Nevertheless, O'Connor writes:

> *julien donkey-boy* offers us viewers, a la *Gummo*'s aesthetic logic, many poetic snapshots and character portraits that come from Julien's immediate surroundings; they include: the black albino rapper "straight from Alabama" (Victor Varnaldo) and the armless drummer who hangs out with Julien's dad. A la *Gummo,* these poetic portraits express how the experience of difference does not have to be

> demeaning or exotic as in a circus or freak show; rather, these portraits offer chances to experience the world from empowering viewpoints that many people have never experienced before and, which, can also expose how the fear of difference is an irrational, illusory fear of life-one that deserves to be laughed at more than anything else.

I disagree with O'Connor. Korine makes these characters look like they are in a circus act. I will address the Black albino from Alabama in a later chapter; however, the man devouring cigarettes and the armless drummer in *julien donkey-boy* are both excellent examples of Korine's exploitive humor.

Figure 1.42: *julien donkey-boy* – A crowd erupts in laughter as a man performs a bizarre parlor trick: eating an entire pack of lit cigarettes.

Figure 1.43: *julien donkey-boy* – An armless man plays drums with his feet while an overweight African American woman dances.

Although he denies being exploitive, Korine wants to shock. Caught in a particularly honest moment, Korine reveals his outlook on humor. "It's a nice feeling to laugh at something and feel a bit guilty. You know you should feel a little bit guilty for laughing."[91] I find this statement to be particularly telling. To be sure, Korine seems defensive when it comes to the issue of shock. Although he likes to push boundaries, and is a self-proclaimed "provocateur," he does not like to be described as "exploitive" or using "shock for shock's own sake." Korine tries to explain:

> I don't think there's anything as a real taboo, and if there is, I think it should be broken right away. I wouldn't shy away from anything. I don't think there's any way to go too far myself. I mean, there are things people can do to go too far – in a stupid and silly way – just to do it for the sake of doing it […] and I'm not really concerned with that – that idea of shock for shock's sake. You know? I mean, I am a provocateur in a sense, but […] I don't find anything I've ever done shocking. And I don't think I've done anything that's taboo.[92]

Soon after this relatively unconvincing argument, Korine abruptly ends the interview. Although he often lies to journalists and industry personnel, it does seem that the aforementioned quote was in earnest. In the upcoming chapters, I aim to show not only that Korine not only aims to shock, but also that he relies on sterotypes to minimize and diminish marginalized groups.

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91 Daniel Trilling. "Imperfect Harmony," *New Statesman*. 6 March 2008.

92 Harmony Korine. "Animated Photo Gallery with Commentary with Director Harmony Korine." *Gummo*. New Line Home Video. 1997. DVD.

CHAPTER 2: HIPSTER RACISM

CONTEMPORARY RACISM

Before we get to hipster racism, it is important to identify how racism has changed in recent years. Outside of white supremacy groups, it is no longer socially acceptable for white people to be openly racist. Nowadays, discourse around racism is coded in a way that whiteness is ignored and Blackness is vilified.

After the civil rights movement, social conservative political strategists realized that "for any countermovement to be successful, it was essential to fashion a discourse that maneuvered scrupulously around the nation's racial fault lines without appearing to be indignant toward the most basic claims for racial equality."[93] With the formation of the New Right, the dominant social class, which was predominately wealthy Whites, made deliberate strategic movements to retain their elevated status. By speaking in coded language, social conservatives were able to keep African Americans and other minorities at the bottom of the poverty line. So, rather than blatant, on-the-nose racism, we began to see politicians employing rhetorical devices, such as associating Blackness with terms such as "war on drugs" and "welfare state." By engaging in this type of discourse, conservative strategists were able maintain the status quo, while blaming minorities for their own difficulties. As Watkins writes:

> One feature that enhances the efficacy of social conservatism is its capacity to politicize race without necessarily making explicit references to race. In fact, a new vocabulary for referencing whiteness has been elaborately fashioned over the last three decades. For example, the discourses pivoting around terms like *traditional values,*

93 Craig Watkins. *Representing: Hip Hop Culture and the Production of Black Cinema*. (Chicago: UChicago Press.1998) 25 - 26.

> *reverse discrimination, Middle America,* and *family values* seek to develop an idiom that speaks to the often unspoken site of white privilege, power, and hierarchy."[94]

In fact, as long as powerful whites are able to associate Blackness with deviant social elements, they don't need a vocabulary for whiteness at all. "Ignoring and therefore not naming the broad array of privileges and manifestations associated with whiteness only serves to fortify its power and presumed naturalness."[95]

Building on the work of scholars like George Lipsitz and Craig Watkins, Eduardo Bonilla-Silva examines this new contemporary racism in his book *Racism without Racists*. When contemporary whites talk about minorities, Bonilla-Silva explains, "They talk in a very careful, indirect, hesitant manner and, occasionally, even through coded language."[96] For all those who argue that the election of Barack Obama has propelled us into a post-racial age, Bonilla-Silva eloquently explains:

> The Obama phenomenon is the product of the fundamental racial transformation that transpired in America in the 1960s and 70s. The new racial order that emerged – the "new racism" – unlike Jim Crow, reproduces racial domination mostly through subtle and covert discriminatory practices which are often institutionalized, defended with coded language ("*Those* urban people" or "*Those* people on welfare"), and bonded by the racial ideology or color-blind racism. Compared to Jim Crow, this new system seems genteel but it is extremely effective in preserving systemic advantages for whites and keeping people of color at bay. The new regime is, in the immortal lyrics of Robert Flack's song, of the "killing me softly" variety.[97]

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94 Craig Watkins. *Representing: Hip Hop Culture and the Production of Black Cinema*. (Chicago: UChicago Press.1998) 40.
95 Ibid, 155.
96 Eduardo Bonilla–Silva. *Racism without Racists: Color-Blind Racism and the Persistence of Racial Inequality in America*. (Lanham, MD: Rowman & Littlefield, 2009) 55.
97 Ibid, 213.

As we shall see, this new regime is one in which Korine is well versed and very invested.

HIPSTER RACISM

First appearing in Carmen Van Kerckhove's article on the racism-awareness blog *Racialicious*, the term "hipster racism" encapsulates the aesthetic of Korine better than any other I have encountered. I contend that it is precisely due to Korine's elevated hipster status that he is able to engage in such racist discourse. A respected contemporary artist and experimental filmmaker, Korine has modeled for Marc Jacobs, done paintings for Urban Outfitters, and directed films for high-end womenswear label Proenza Schouler. Korine frequently uses racist imagery in an attempt to be ironic, urbane, and progressive.

By definition, "Hipster racism defines an ironic position where someone in a race-privileged position believes themselves nonracist and enlightened enough to be allowed to make racist jokes ironically." [98] Although there are countless contemporary examples, an oft-cited instance is the July 2008 *New Yorker* cover of Barack and Michelle Obama. On this cover, Barack is dressed in Muslim garb and Michelle resembles a militant Black panther, donning an Afro, camouflage pants, and a bandolier. Meant to be satirical, this is an excellent example of privileged, urbane, white people trying to use racial stereotypes in an ironic way. Moreover, the *New Yorker* editors expected the cover to be viewed as clearly nonracist.

If this image had appeared on the cover of a right-wing publication, people would have been up in arms, but because it ran on *The New Yorker*, many readers gave it a pass. As Kristina Busse points out, "What is interesting about hipster racism is that the identity

98 Jonathan Gray and Derek Johnson. *A Companion to Media Authorship*. (West Sussex, UK: John Wiley & Sons, 2013) 56.

of the author/creator is central yet their intent unimportant. What takes its place in meaning production is audience reception and perception of the author's positionality and ethos […]" [99] This is extremely convenient for Korine, as he is recognized as an enlightened artist, and thus able to create the images he wants without much pushback. Korine's hipster status and exultation from the art community at large has given him free reign to stereotype in his work. Recently commissioned by Proenza Schouler, a New York clothing label that sells $3,000 handbags, Korine made two edgy (read stereotypical) advertisements for their upcoming lines.

***Act da Fool* (2010)**

Korine's first Proenza Schouler film focuses on a group of African American girls living in abject poverty. All the girls' clothing and accessories are Proenza Schouler: a product they could never afford. Like much of Korine's work, the video is a mixture of still photographs, moving film, and uses a variation of color tones; however, his visual aesthetic is not what concerns me. From the outset Korine makes it clear that this film is not to be taken too seriously.

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99 Jonathan Gray and Derek Johnson. *A Companion to Media Authorship*. (West Sussex, UK: John Wiley & Sons, 2013) 56.

<u>Figure 2.1:</u> *<u>Act da Fool</u>* – While we watch a handheld shot of cars passing in the background, we hear a voiceover. In a serious tone, a girl says, "I believe that the Earth is a big ball of shit. That's why the dinosaur died out."

In an attempt at humor, Korine establishes early on that this short film is not to be taken literally, while also making the girl sound inane. Even the title itself – the use of "da" rather than "the" is in jest, positioning Blacks as uneducated. Nevertheless, it is an offensive representation of poor African American girls. To offer an opposing viewpoint, some viewers could argue that *Act da Fool* is artistic and uplifting, as the main girl does want to leave her impoverished town.

<u>Figures 2.2 – 2.3:</u> *<u>Act da Fool</u>* – In order to acknowledge opposing viewpoints, I have include these two shots, which are accompanied by the following voiceover: "Sometimes I can spend up to an hour staring at a bird up on a tree. I wish I was that bird and I could just fly away." Proponents of *Act Da Fool*'s merits would likely argue that the film is a visual poem and an uplifting one at that: a girl using a creative outlet – poetry and daydreaming – to escape her environment.

Figure 2.4 *Act da Fool* – In this shot, we see the main girl vandalizing a garbage bin with the word "coke." Here again we see Korine's penchant for painting blacks as deviants. The fact that she vandalizes by herself suggests either one or two things: 1. What O'Connor would argue – that this is her artistic outlet, a way to cope with her hopeless surroundings, or 2. That she is pathologically deviant due to her Blackness. The word "coke" itself carries a strong meaning, given the familiar association between Blacks and the crack epidemic in this country.

In another sequence, the main girl's voiceover says, "I like the way animals hang out in the trash in parking lots. My friends and I are a gang of fools. We can act like wild animals." While listening to this, we watch the girl and her friends stand in a parking lot and hit discarded rubber tires with sticks. This direct parallel between the girls and dirty animals rummaging through trash is disconcerting.

Figure 2.5: *Act da Fool* – Korine's stereotyping is palpable, as the girls are presented as drunks and vandals.

<u>Figures 2.6 – 2.10:</u> *<u>Act da Fool</u>* – Five consecutive shots from the wild animals sequence. The camera is pans from right to left during Figures 2.8 and 2.9.

The girls chug 40 ounce bottles of malt liquor and menacingly hold hammers. At a wig shop, the two girls with Afros are in the foreground, holding Anglo women's wigs; then the girls smoke marijuana, get drunk, and inexplicably, play basketball.


Figures 2.11 – 2.12: ***Act da Fool.***

In fact, we see the same stereotypes in *Act da Fool* that have existed since early silent cinema and the minstrel shows of old. As Donald Bogle notes, Blacks have historically been stereotyped as fitting neatly into one of five different tropes, all of which are "used for the same effect: to entertain by stressing Negro inferiority."[100] In *Act da Fool*, Korine portrays the African American girls as bestial and buffoonish; they fit rather neatly into Bogle's coon trope.

If one were only to listen to the film's voiceover, perhaps *Act da Fool* could be construed as an optimistic narrative. After all, the story is ostensibly an uplifting one about a girl who addresses the importance of "being good to one another" and trying to "make it out (of) this dead end town." Nevertheless, by employing the most banal stereotypes imaginable, Korine merely reinforces the status quo, ensuring that the real version of that girl will never leave that town.

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100 Donald Bogle. *Toms, Coons, Mulattoes, Mammies, and Bucks*. (New York: Viking Press. 1973) 4.

***Snowballs* (2011)**

Korine was commissioned him to do another video the following year, and in typical Korine fashion, his follow-up effort was equally stereotypical. He again ironically features a marginalized group, this time focusing on Native Americans. *Snowballs* opens with the sound of cackling fire and an image of a forest, followed by a distorted, alien voiceover proclaiming, "They tried to kill us but it did not work." Then we cut to two child-like Native Americans clutching bow and arrows, wearing traditional Native American attire, and dancing along a lower-income suburban street.

Figure 2.13: *Snowballs* – Two Native Americans in the rural south. The alien voiceover continues: "We are from the broken nation, battered and bruised, but still tearing shit up," as the two characters walk through woods toward their teepee.

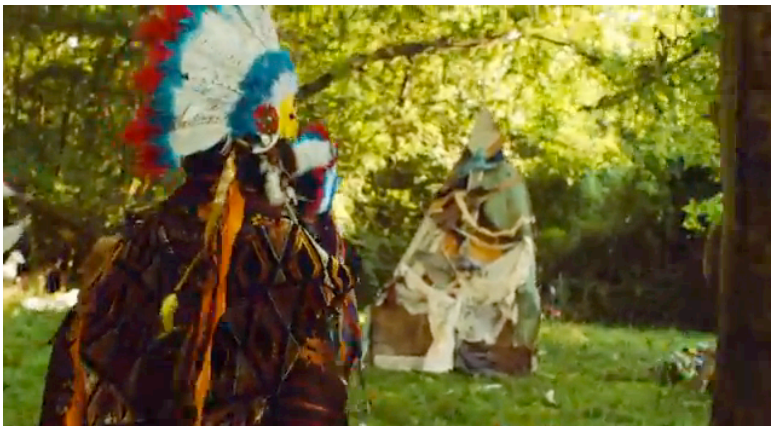

Figure 2.14: *Snowballs* – In this shaky, handheld shot, we see their home: a dilapidated teepee.

Now here is where *Snowballs*' representations begin to get truly stereotypical – all in the name of irony, of course. Korine includes a white character, but he is sexually deviant, overweight, infirm, and destitute. As we saw in the very brief analysis of *Gummo*, Korine does not shy away from stereotyping whites – as long as they are outsiders within the white in-group (invalids, albinos, deaf, blind, mentally handicapped). This particular white man serves a specific purpose in *Snowballs* though. He is in the video to show that the Native Americans are the Alien; they are the true out-group. Despite his clear repugnance and subterranean socioeconomic status, the hillbilly (he says "I'm just a good ol' boy") still stands on higher ground than the Native Americans.

<u>Figures 2.15 – 2.18: *Snowballs*</u> – Figure 2.15 is an establishing shot. In Figure 2.16, the "good ole boy" says, "I can understand what the white man done to you; they took away your soul and run you through hell. Not good." Then in the reverse shot, Figure 2.17, the Native American woman communicates with bizarre hand motions, further eroticizing her Othernesss. Figure 2.18: To which the poor white man responds, "Oh baby that turns me on. That's kinkier than hell, I like it." Here, Korine's jokes are killing two birds with one stone: one, the joke reaffirms that this is merely an ironic, humorous piece, and two, that if women wear these Proenza Schouler clothes they too will be Otherly, and thus exotic and irresistible to men.

In addition to the childlike, alien voiceover, Korine further exoticizes the Native Americans by making them dumb and mute, as they communicate via dances and hand gestures. Also, the Native American's pants, which are based on the patterns and colors of Native American blankets, are from the Fall 2011 Proenza Schouler line; yet another example of appropriation of a marginalized culture by those in position of power, in this case, ultra wealthy fashion designers. According to a *Vogue* article, "Jack McCollough and Lazaro Hernandez 'went on a little road trip from Santa Fe to Wyoming' and 'picked up some [Native American] blankets on the way […]"[101] Like Korine, these powerful men exploit the disenfranchised, all in the name of art. In this respect Korine, Jack McCullough, and Lazaro Hernandez make a formidable team.

Figure 2.19: *Snowballs* – This medium shot provides a look at the Proenza Schouler pants.

101 Hamis Bowles. "Proenza Schouler Fall 2011 Review," *Vogue*. Web. 17 February 2011.

KORINE'S CHARACTERS IN BLACKFACE

Minstrel shows were a particularly shameful chapter in United States history. From the mid-1800s through the early 20th century, theater performers painted their faces black and engaged in comedic performances designed to make fun of Blacks. This practice continued throughout the silent film era, with the likes of Al Jolson and other comedians engaging in blackface performances. Korine incidentally cites Jolson as a strong influence. Given Korine's penchant for provocation, it's no supprise that he is infatued with blackface. Although blackface performance has long been assumed to be undoubtedly racist, some scholars are beginning to argue that it is now an issue of reception.

In regard to contemporary blackface performances on Saturday Night Live, Mary Beltran writes:

> Reactions to these performances appear to have been almost universally positive, indicative of what I consider contemporary public interest in entertainment that reninforces notions that we've entered a presumed 'post-racial' era. The raical fluidity emphasized in such performances, I argue, is celebrated as politically correct, if sensational fun, particularly when the performers are of mixed racial heritage and can claim partial "in-group" status in relation to their roles.[102]

Some writers have go so far as to suggest that blackface is no longer offensive. Beltran explains:

> Joshua Alston, writing for *Newsweek,* expressed the opinion that the history of blackface performance was sinmply no longer an issue: 'If watching (SNL's Fred) Armisen play Obama makes

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102 Mary Beltran. "SNL's 'Fauxbama' Debate: Facing Off Over Millenial (Mixed-) Racial Impersonation." *Saturday Night Live and American Television*, Ed. Ron Becker, Nick Marx, Matt Sienkiewicz. (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2013).

> people uncomfortable, it's because watching a white actor with his skin darkened calls to mind a painful chapter in America's history. But minstrelsy, at leat white minstrelsy, doesn't exist anymore.' In other words, younger, white writers were least likely to view the legacy of minstrelsy as a relevant concern to contemporary media representation.[103]

Joshua Alston is, in fact, an African American, but nevertheless Beltran's point is well made: it is partly an issue of reception, and the impact of contemporary blackface performance is dependent on both the age of the viewer and the ethnicity of the performer. If the viewer is older, he or she is more likely to take offense to blackface performance. Moroever, if the performer is of mixed racial heritage, viewers may find the performance to be more palatable. As Beltran writes, "presumably, (Armisen) is viewed as 'black enough' to play Obama without disturbing the sleeping giant which is the cultural memory of minstrelsy."[104] To the best of my knowledge, all of Korine's blackface performers have been white. Also, given Korine's love of vaudeville, tap dancing, and comedians from the 1920s, one could certainly make the argument that Korine has nostalgia for the minstrels of old. In chronological order, what follows is an inventory of Korine's characters in blackface.

***The Diary of Anne Frank Part II* (1997)**

Korine's 30-minute long triptych film first appeared in October of 1997 at the Patrick Painter Gallery in Santa Monica, CA. Much of the footage seems to have been leftovers from *Gummo*. According to *Frieze Magazine*'s Dan Fox, it is "ostensibly non-narrative," "in quasi-documentary form," and "the handicapped and disadvantaged are

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103 Ibid.
104 Ibid.

the subject of *The Diary…"*[105] Pretty much business-as-usual for Korine. Fox continues, "In one touching scene, an old man dressed as a black and white minstrel remarks to the camera 'they say I'm not funny anymore' before performing a stiff, faltering dance [I didn't see the exhibit, but I'm assuming it's a tap dance] while singing 'My Bonnie Lies Over the Ocean." Although Fox finds the scene touching, it is the first of many unnerving examples of Korine using blackface in his work. Considering the fact that this film was screened at a reputable art gallery, the audience for this project was presumably erudite. Although I did not see *The Diary*, the minstrel's line, "They say I'm not funny anymore," seems to be Korine offering a commentary about how blackface performance is no longer acceptable. Again, one could make the argument that Korine is nostalgic for old school minstrels.

***Gummo trailer* (1997)**

The *Gummo* minstrel scene was ultimately cut from the film. Nevertheless, the minstrel was featured in the theatrical trailer for the film. Explaining why Korine decided to remove the scene from *Gummo*, he says, "It was interesting on its own, but I felt like it took away from the flow of the film."[106] Given his preoccupation with minstrelsy, it is not surprising that he initially wanted to feature a minstrel in his directorial debut. Not wanting to waste the footage, Korine likely used the footage in the aforementioned project *The Diary of Anne Frank Part II*.

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105 Thomas Dane. *Frieze Magazine*. Issue 54, Sep./Oct. 2000.

106 Harmony Korine. *Interview with Bruce LaBruce*. Kodak Lecture Series: Harmony Korine. Ryerson University, Toronto. Web. 1 April 2005.

Figure 2.20– 2.21: *Gummo* theatrical trailer – Two stills from the trailer.

Carmen* / *Harmony Korine* (1999) from *Aura Rosenberg's Who Am I? What Am I? Where Am I?

Over the course of twelve years, contemporary artist Aura Rosenberg enlisted eighty artists to create a photo portrait archive, in which each artist painted a child's face. Korine's contribution was a photograph of Rosenberg's daughter Carmen in blackface. Much like *The Diary of Anne Frank Part II*, Korine likely assumed the audience for *Carmen* would be cultured and not likely to construe his work as racist.

Figure 2.22: *Carmen* – The fact that Korine places a guitar in the child's arms suggests that she is an entertainer.

***The Devil, The Sinner and His Journey* (2000)**

Part of Korine's art exhibition *The Sigil of the Cloven Hoof Marks Thy Path; The Devil, The Sinner and His Journey* featured Korine in blackface as O.J. Simpson, and Johnny Depp sans face paint, as Kato Kalin. Admittedly, Korine's face paint in *The Devil, The Sinner and His Journey* is more closely aligned with black metal music than traditional blackface; however, since he is playing O.J. Simpson, it is definitely meant to provoke. The "n" word, albeit with three g's, is also painted along his left arm. Again, given that this is part of an art exhibition, it is presumed that the audience is erudite.

Figure 2.23: *The Devil, The Sinner and His Journey* – Korine's exhibition ran from April 8 – May 6, 2000 at the Patrick Painter Gallery in L.A., and then from May 27 to June 16, 2000 at the Galerie du Jour Agnès b. in Paris. Agnès b. is a successful French fashion designer who let Korine live with her in Paris when he was drug addled and destitute. She and Korine are currently co-founders of the film studio O'Salvation.

***Jokes* (2000)**

Originally designed to be a three-part film, *Jokes* was a project Korine started with Gus Van Sant in 2000. Although Van Sant completed a draft of his part, the other two-thirds never came to fruition. According to Korine:

> *Jokes* is a film that I wrote about two years ago. I have always been a fan of vaudeville, and I have for a long time

> had the desire to direct and revive the classic blackface minstrels of yesteryear, in particular those early Al Jolson and Eddie Cantor classics that helped inspire me to become the person I am today. In fact, my two life-long dream projects are both epic in scope: the first is to star as a tap-dancing minstrel in a film called 'The Grace of Blackface.'[107]

This quote further bolsters the suggestion that Korine is nostalgic for the older, more sinister blackface representations.

***Korine Tap* (2000)**

Filmed in Rowayton, Connecticut on October 21, 2000, *Korine Tap* depicts Korine and someone with their faces and arms painted black. It was entry #22 in a series of one-minute films commissioned by Stop For a Minute and FilmFour. *Dazed & Confused Magazine* editor Jefferson Hack shot it, and Brian Frank, Bobby Gillespie, and Andrea Helgasdottir appear in this stereotypical short film. Much like Korine's *The Diary of Anne Frank Part II*; *The Devil, The Sinner and His Journey,* and *Carmen*, *Korine Tap* was predominately viewed by contemporary art enthusiasts.

Figure 2.24 – 2.29 Six non-consecutive shots from *Korine Tap.*

107 Korine, Harmony. *Collected screenplays / Harmony Korine*. (London: Faber & Faber. 2002).

***No More Workhouse Blues* (2004)**

Will Oldham, who currently goes by the stage name "Bonnie 'Prince' Billy," is an iconoclastic folk singer, photographer, and film actor who is close friends with Korine. In fact, Oldman appeared briefly in *julien donkey-boy*. When Oldman asked Korine to direct the music video for his song *No More Workhouse Blues,* Korine dressed his future-wife Rachel Simon in blackface and depicted her playing racquetball with an African American man with dollar bills signs in his eyes.

Figure 2.30: *No More Workhorse Blues* – The dollar bills over the African American man's eyes suggests he is a spectacle not to be taken seriously. Korine often portrays Blacks as comedic, unscrupulous "street hustlers." We see this in *Spring Breakers* and *Gummo* as well.

By putting dollar bills over the man's eyes, Korine makes a caricature of the man, insinuating that he is a hustler. That aside, the most problematic part of the music video is the final sequence, in which Rachel Korine's character commits suicide by hanging from a tree. Although it is technically a suicide, the imagery looks very much like a lynching.


Figures 2.31 – 2.32: *No More Workhorse Blues* – These two shots resemble a lynching, especially seeing as Rachel Korine is in blackface and a rural home is in the background.

I suppose someone could make the counterargument that Korine's video is a commentary on the legacy of slavery, and that the video is suggesting Blacks are no longer subjected to untold horrors and unpaid physical labor. After all, the lyrics to the song are, "I held my own for you / Where is my tongue? / I am no more workhorse / I am a grazing horse / I am your favorite horse." Are these lyrics telling the story of a man no longer forced to perform slave labor? Personally, I think this is would be reading too much into the lyrics. In all likelihood, Korine is up to his same old tricks: using blackface to shock and making the Black man look money-crazed and asinine.

Figure 2.33: *No More Workhorse Blues* – This shot shows Korine depicting the African American as an amusement object and a buffoon, fulfilling Donald Bogle's coon trope.

CHAPTER 3: STEREOTYPING, HIP-HOP, AND MISAPPROPRIATION OF BLACK AESTHETCIS

In this thesis, I am not trying to argue that Korine is a racist. That being said, he does not shy away from addressing racism in his films. During his first feature film, Korine makes a point to address the prevalence of racism in the south.

Gummo

During *Gummo*, some of the non-actors' improvised dialogue revealed that they are likely racist. In a 1998 interview with Cameron Jamie for *Frieze Magazine*, Korine said, "In the South you'll see kids with rat-tail haircuts and Bone Thugs & Harmony t-shirts, but at the same time, they go home and their parents talk about how they hate Blacks. The kids will be racists, but they will totally love Eazy-E or Too Short. That's the space *Gummo* lives in."[108] Apparently, Korine, who grew up in Nashville, wanted to capture these racist kids on screen. This does not make *Gummo* a racist film, nor does it render Korine a racist, but it does reveal Korine's interest in exposing, or at least acknowledging, racism.

Figure 3.1: *Gummo* – Korine lets the Nashville locals talk freely. While talking about his time in prison, this kid says he "hates n***s."**

108 Cameron Jamie. *Frieze Publishing*. Issue 38. Jan/Feb. 1998.

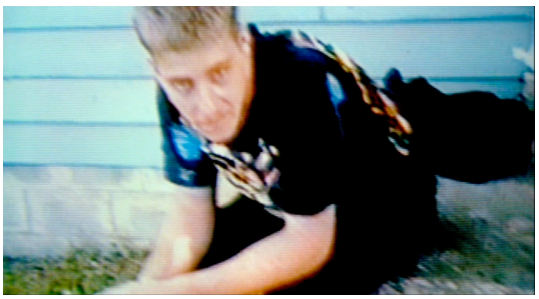

Figure 3.2: *Gummo* – The hand-held camera pans to his friend, who breaks the fourth wall.

Figure 3.3: *Gummo* – Here again we see a character breaking the fourth wall. She says she had some "good n**r friends at Pearl," a reference to Pearl-Cohn High School in Nashville.**

What is more troubling than Korine's acknowledgement of ignorant youths in the south is his penchant for using stereotypes in an attempt at humor. We see this most evidently in *Mister Lonely*.

Mister Lonely

As I mentioned before, Korine continues to portray African Americans in a stereotypical fashion, adhering to the tropes that Bogle identified. In fact, in *Mister Lonely*, Korine has a character that was pulled from the early 20th century. The film is about a commune of celebrity impersonators; nevertheless, Korine's Buckwheat character is the classic example of a pickaninny child: a buffoonish amusement object. Just as in 'Our Gang' and 'The Little Rascals,' Korine's Buckwheat character in *Mister Lonely* is comical at the expense of Blacks.

Korine's Buckwheat is not onscreen for very long, nor does he have many lines; however, when he does speak, he is revealed to be crass, silly, and sexually deviant. Although he spends most of his time in the chicken coop, during one 54 second-long scene, Buckwheat has the screen to himself. He rides a horse alongside a river and proclaims:

> I love women. They're hot. They make me sweat. I love chickens. I love their wings, like breasts. If you combine a chicken with women's breast, you get chicken breast. I like chicken breast. Chicken breast is nice. And hot. If it wasn't *(sic)* up to me, I'd make the world naked woman and naked chickens. That's hot. Yeah, I love women. They are so… they make me sweat. I love chickens. Their breasts are so smooth.

Seeing as the character sleeps in the chicken coop, Korine is insinuating that Buckwheat's love of chickens is sexual in nature. Here, Korine utilizes the classic pickananny trope, which portrays the character as cartoonish in order to make the audience laugh.

Figure 3.4: *Mister Lonely* – During this scene, Buckwheat speaks in short, inane sentences, as he describes his love for chickens and women.

As we will see, the pickananny stereotype is employed in *Gummo* as well.

Gummo* & Hype Williams' *Belly

In *Gummo,* Korine stereotypes abundantly; however, because the film takes place in Xenia, Ohio, Blacks don't really receive the brunt of it. Aside from the homosexual African American dwarf in the Israel shirt, the only time we see Blacks onscreen are the scenes with the entrepreneurial neighborhood swindlers. These two twin brothers, Terry and Phelipo, sell candy door to door under the guise of charity workers**.** At such a young age, Korine's young Blacks have learned to get ahead via criminal activity – a common stereotype.

Figure 3.5:*Gummo* – Solomon's mother purchases a Crunch bar from the twins. Terry says, "The money goes to children with cancer." Phelipo chimes in, "Also with Hodgkin's disease."

Figure 3.6-3.7: *Gummo* – After she brings the candy bar to Solomon in the tub, we cut back to the young hustlers, who are reveling in their scam. "Man, we been making all this money. Yeah, all the hoes like this. Yeah, buy the teachers too so I wouldn't have to go to school no more […] just selling candy, getting money, making the greenbacks." Here, Korine is stereotyping young Blacks as disinterested in the prospect of education. In Korine's outlook, young Blacks see more potential in street hustling.

As mentioned earlier, one of the most intriguing aspects of both contemporary and hipster racism is that it is ultimately a reception issue; put differently, the message is less important than the messenger. In the case of Korine, he is able to portray Blacks poorly and still receive a pass because of his hipster status. Interestingly, Hype Williams, who Craig Watkins praises for using cinematic techniques and revolutionizing hip-hop music videos[109], decided to feature an extended clip of *Gummo* in his 1998 directorial debut *Belly*.

<u>Figures 3.8 – 3.24: Hype Williams' *Belly*</u> – After murdering people and robbing a nightclub, Sincere (rap artist Nas), Tommy (rap artist DMX), and Mark (Hassan Johnson) return to Tommy's plush apartment. Upon arrival, Tommy immediately turns on *Gummo*. In between Figure 3.16 and Figure 3.19, Williams cuts away from the television screen, but you can still hear one of the cowboys' racial epithets in the diegetic sound.

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109 Craig Watkins writes, "In the cluttered world of pop music culture, Hype made rap music videos matter." (*Hip Hop Matters*, 214).

Presumably Williams would not have featured this clip so predominately in *Belly* if he thought Korine was a racist. Williams is best known for working with rappers, and *Belly* stars Nas, DMX, and Method Man. I will address Williams' work in more depth in chapter five.

julien donkey-boy

Another example of both stereotyping can be found in the freestyle-rapping scene in *julien donkey-boy*. The albinistic Black comedian Victor Varnado plays a rapper hanging out at the deaf clinic where Julien does volunteer work. Varnado, who grew up in Huntsville, Alabama, freestyle-raps while a blind man does the beat-box and Julien claps and dances. Although it is a decent rap, Varnado's chorus "I'm a Black albino straight from Alabama" suggests that this scene is in jest. After all, Varnado is a comedian.


Figures 3.25 -3.26: *julien donkey-boy* – Comedian Victor Varnado's 46 second-long freestyle rap.

KORINE AND HIP-HOP

At this point, it would be a good time to take a closer look at hip-hop. Rap is Korine's favorite musical genre, and it is significant that he never cared for socially conscious rap. He prefers contemporary rap, especially drill music and trap rap, both subgenres that are more concerned with gangsterism, materialism, and male chauvinism than socially conscious issues. Korine has even described drill music, a Chicago-based rap format, as "super primitive chanting."[110] He says, "I always hear the critique that [rap]'s become dumbed down and stripped of any kind of meaning. But I like this stuff best. I never really liked socially conscious rap."[111] Korine is obsessed with vaudeville, blackface, and using performance as humor, so it should come as no surprise that he never liked hip-hop artists with political and social messages.

Korine likely takes umbrage with the hip-hop purists who are mourning the dissolution of hip-hop. Dyson writes, "Hip-hop is but the seductive corporate packaging of vicious stereotypes black folk have tried to defeat since our ancestors were uprooted and brought to America in chains. Except now, critics of hip-hop claim, the chains that bind us are more mental and psychological than physical."[112] I believe that Korine's apathy for socially conscious hip-hop and his adoration for trap rap and drill music speaks volumes. Korine pays reverence to the part of the hip-hop movement that essentially keeps poor Black people in their place. For the most part, many of today's rap

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110 Ross Scarano. "Interview: Harmony Korine Talks 'Spring Breakers' as a Pop Song, Chief Keef, and How White People Ruin Everything." *Complex Magazine*. Web. 15 March 2013.

111 Ibid.

112 Michael Eric Dyson. *Holler if You Hear Me: Searching for Tupac Shakur*. (New York: Basic Civitas Books, 2001) 111.

artists work in tandem with artists like Korine to maintain the status quo. Watkins writes, "[the] hip-hop movement's most voluble voice – rap music – [has] surrendered much of its ambition and originality for music that [cares] more about servicing rather than subverting the status quo."[113] In recent years, Korine has certainly been working with those hip-hop artists that work to maintain the status quo. In the last three years, he has collaborated with trap-rappers, comedic rappers, and white rappers: Gucci Mane, Riff Raff, and Die Antwoord, respectively.

Umshini Wan

Funded by Agnes b.'s production company, *Umshini Wan* (2011) is a short film starring Ninja and Yo-Landi of the white, South African rap-duo Die Antwoord. Like most of Korine's projects, the two characters in *Umshini Wan* are disenfranchised and restless. Ninja and Yo Landi are homeless, and despite not being infirm, they travel around in wheelchairs.

Early in the short, it becomes clear that these characters are aspiring rappers who are not to be taken seriously. We watch Yo-Landi free-style rapping, while the duo smokes an oversized joint and cooks hotdogs at a campfire.

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113 S. Craig Watkins. *Hip Hop Matters: Politics, Pop Culture, and the Struggle for the Soul of a Movement*. (Boston: Beacon Press, 2005) 139.

<u>Figures 3.27 – 3.30: *Umshini Wan*</u> – Yo-Landi complains that nobody takes them seriously because of their wheelchairs, while Ninja lights the marijuana and says, "Gangsta," revealing early on that *Umshini Wan* is a parody of sorts.

<u>Figures 3.31 – 3.33: *Umshini Wan*</u> – In the following scene, they shoot their guns into the air, much like the scene in *Spring Breakers*.

<u>Figure 3.34 – 3.35: *Spring Breakers*.</u>

After this sequence, we cut to Ninja freestyling, and then to a sequence of the two of them playing basketball in wheelchairs. Again, in the name of comedy, here is Korine

breaking down Black culture into oversimplified, trite stereotypes: violence, rap, and basketball.



<u>Figures 3.36 – 3.38:</u> <u>*Umshini Wan*</u> – Like much of Korine's work, this short film features poor adolescents suffering from ennui. These white rappers yield guns and dribble basketballs: a caricature of Blackness.

As if the race issue wasn't on the surface yet, Korine introduces us to a wheelchair salesman who tells Yo-Landi and Ninja, "You're a waste of a white skin. You're like white n****ers," at which point they murder the man and steal the wheelchairs. Then, to keep this inane storyline going, the two rappers go to an auto shop, where they kill the shopkeeper in order to acquire specialty, hologrammed rims for their wheelchairs. In a not-so-subtle way, Korine is poking fun at the tricked-out car culture that is prevalent in the contemporary hip-hop world. Ninja gets an "Alien" hologram on his wheels, and Yo-Landi places a marijuana leaf on hers. Korine portrays the duo as modern-day minstrels, and the imagery is very similar to that of *Spring Breakers*.

Figures 3.39 – 3.42: *Umshini Wan* – Note the alien holograms on Ninja's wheels. I will address alien imagery in the next chapter.

Figure 3.43: *Spring Breakers* – Clownish dollar bills on Alien's Chevrolet Camaro.

A Crackup at the Race Riots and Tupac Shakur

When Korine went on the David Letterman show in 1997 to promote *Gummo*, he described his next project as a novel about a Florida race war, where "the Jewish people sit in trees. And the Blacks are run by MC Hammer and the Whites are run by Vanilla Ice."[114] In reality, the novel, like much of his work, does not have a storyline. *A Crackup at the Race Riots* is a non-narrative, stream of consciousness collection of jokes. Rather

114 Harmony Korine. Interview with David Letterman. *Late Show with David Letterman*. CBS. 17 Oct.1997.

than 35mm mixed with High-8 and Polaroids, with *Crackup,* Korine offers us scanned images and handwritten notes intertwined with traditional text. Instead of still photography with people's eyes scratched out, Korine provides lines of strikethrough text. Additionally, Korine's subject matter is similar. In vaudevillian style, Korine offers comical stories, a barrage of one-liners, and dark subject matter, such as suicide notes with empty signature lines. As usual, no subject is too taboo and his goal is to shock.

In a famous scene from *Gummo*, a gossip columnist attempts to sexually assault Dot, Helen, and Darby. Before the attack, the man explains his line of work: "I'm a gossip writer for a newspaper […] it's like 'Tupac Shakur stuttered; Warren Oates swallowed his chewing tobacco spittle; Placido Domingo loved sherbet ice cream; Adolf Hitler had one testicle; P.T. Barnum had an ulcer the size of a small oyster; Henry Winkler is allergic to papaya; Satchel Paige shot heroin down in Cuba…"[115] Praised by Jim Carroll and, of course, Werner Herzog, *Crackup* has pages and pages and of one-liners like this. In fact, on page 71, right after "Tom Petty has a dirty fish tank," readers will find "Placido Domingo likes sherbet."[116] However, there are certainly public figures that appear more frequently in *Crackup* than others, and unfortunately, Tupac Shakur is given the most attention.

In addition to anagrams of Tupac Shakur (Caput Rukahs, Kaput Raucous), Korine includes three fictitious letters by Shakur, as well as a list of "Tupac's Top 10 Novels." With Shakur gunned down in Las Vegas two years before *Crackup* went to print, Korine

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115 Harmony Korine. *Gummo*. New Line Home Video. 1997. DVD.

116 Harmony Korine. *A Crack-Up at the Race Riots*. (Garden City, NY: Doubleday, 1998). 71.

did not have to worry about much backlash. Although Korine readily admits he was on a lot of narcotics at the time, I still find it telling that he went after Shakur.

Tupac Shakur was complex; in fact, he could contradict himself in a single sentence. Nevertheless, throughout his entire life, Shakur strove to bring attention to racial injustice. He tried to "tell the story of [Blacks'] entombment in poverty and stunted social ambition."[117] The son of a Black panther, Shakur was aware of the social ills that plagued Black people, and he was determined to make a difference. As Dyson writes, "Long before he went to jail, Tupac anguished over racism and poverty. He decried a dysfunctional society that profited from these ills while forcing blacks to become thugs and outlaws."[118] Although Shakur endorsed a "thug lifestyle," it was in response to societal inequality. Not only did he have a giant heart (at random, he would visit terminally ill strangers in the hospital), Shakur was also a voracious reader and an intellectual.

> Tupac's literary interests were impressively catholic. He read novelist Kurt Vonnegut and political theorist Mikhail Bakunin. He read books on anarchy and Platonism. He read Teilhard de Chardin'a *The Phenomenon of Man* […] J.D. Salinger's *Catcher in the Rye,* Robert Pirsig's *Zen and the Art of Motorcycle Maintenance,* Richard Wright's *Native Son*, and Maya Angelou's *I Know Why the Caged Bird Sings*. There are novels by Hermann Hesse, Gabriel Garcia Marquez, and Henry Miller. Homer's *Odyssey* pops up, as does the well-regarded anthology of Friedrich Nietzche's work edited by Walter Kaufman.[119]

Tupac also read Carl Jung, Robin Morgan, George Orwell, E.D. Hirsch, Jonathan Kozol, Alex Haley, John Steinbeck, Niccolo Machiavelli, Jamaica Kincaid, Aldous Huxley,

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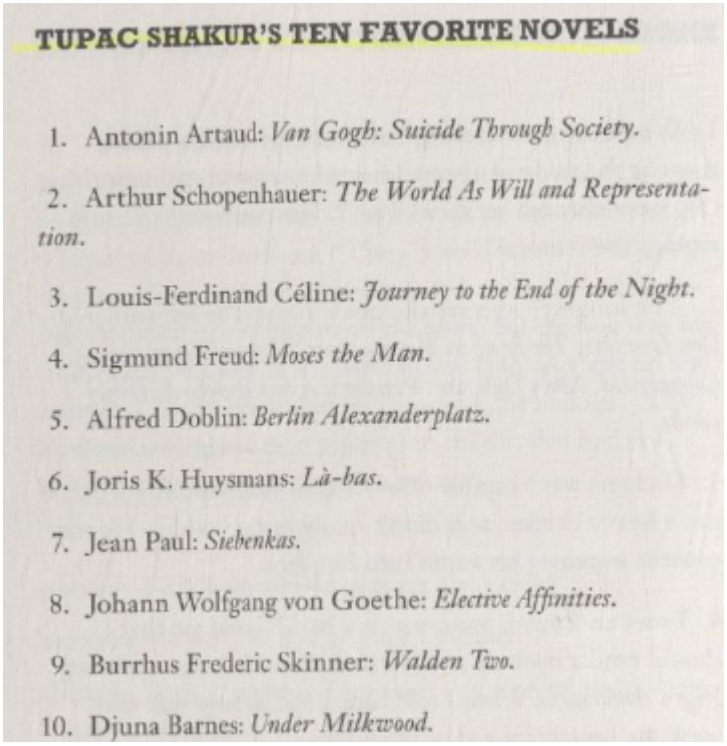
117 Michael Eric Dyson. *Holler if You Hear Me: Searching for Tupac Shakur*. (New York: Basic Civitas Books, 2001) 234.
118 Ibid, 216.
119 Ibid, 93-4.

Anais Nin, Derrick Bell, Sonia Sanchez, Nikki Giovanni, Sun Tzu's *Art of War,* William Styron's *Confessions of Nat Turner*, Eileen Southern's *Music of Black Americans*, Amiri Baraka's *Blues People,* W.E.B. DuBois' *Souls of Black Folk,* William H. Harris' *The Harder We Run: Black Workers Since the Civil War,* and Sigmund Freud. According to his friend, housemate, and onetime manager Leila Steinberg, "[Tupac] read Freud to discredit him…He thought Freud was a frustrated homosexual who never [fully] formulated his opinions."[120] The list of books Shakur consumed goes on and on; however, I've included a lengthy record of them here to argue that Korine's attack on Shakur's intelligence was both insidious and purposeful.

As I mentioned before, Korine devotes an entire page of *A Crackup* to "Tupac Shakur's Ten Favorite Novels."



TUPAC SHAKUR'S TEN FAVORITE NOVELS

1. Antonin Artaud: *Van Gogh: Suicide Through Society.*
2. Arthur Schopenhauer: *The World As Will and Representation.*
3. Louis-Ferdinand Céline: *Journey to the End of the Night.*
4. Sigmund Freud: *Moses the Man.*
5. Alfred Doblin: *Berlin Alexanderplatz.*
6. Joris K. Huysmans: *Là-bas.*
7. Jean Paul: *Siebenkas.*
8. Johann Wolfgang von Goethe: *Elective Affinities.*
9. Burrhus Frederic Skinner: *Walden Two.*
10. Djuna Barnes: *Under Milkwood.*

Figure 3.43: *A Crackup at the Race Riots* – Korine ironically lists Tupac Shakur's favorite novels. Apparently Korine finds it humorous that Shakur would read literature.

120 Ibid, 95.

In this list are Sigmund Freud's *Moses the Man* and Jean Paul's *Siebenkäs*. Given that Shakur did, in fact, read Freud, and that *Siebenkäs* is ostensibly about a man who fakes his own death (a myth often associated with Shakur), one could make argue that Korine's list is not an attempt at humor. However, considering that the rest of Korine's novel is a series of jokes, it is highly unlikely that this list is serious. Moreover, the other references to Shakur, and the three letters written by Shakur, all make the fallen rapper look like inane. For example, in Korine's first letter, which is addressed to his buddy "Nigga Floyd," Korine-as-Tupac writes:

> When I was shot I started having visions, I started remembering whole passages from books that my moms made me read when I was a reluctant nigg, she made me read Mark Twain an Moby Dick an shit an that shit was just poppin' into my head like it'd been there the whole time stuck in the back under a puffed-out haze of fog, whole passages an shit about the power of light an the force of the sight.[121]

So, much like the list of Tupac's favorite novels, here again we see Korine mocking Shakur's intellectualism. The very idea that a Black rapper could be introspective, philosophical, and intellectually curious is fodder for Korine's jesting. Korine's "Letter from Tupac Shakur #2, to a nineteen-year-old German fan, July 1992," portrays Shakur as sexually deviant, and the third letter, which is addressed to Shakur's mother, contains lines such as, "I opened my eyes and saw a deer having sex with a moose."[122] Under the guise of humor, Korine mocks Shakur posthumously. He simultaneously acknowledges Tupac's intellectualism and discredits it. Considering that Shakur's mission in life was to

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121 Harmony Korine. *A Crack-Up at the Race Riots*. (Garden City, NY: Doubleday, 1998) 137.
122 Ibid, 168.

make the world a better place for young Blacks, it is significant that Korine picked him as a target. Whether Korine acknowledges it or not, *A Crackup at the Race Riots* actively works to maintain the status quo.

Rebel (2011), art installation by Harmony Korine and James Franco

Initially scheduled to premiere at Venice Biennale in 2011, James Franco's multimedia art exhibition *Rebel* ran on May 15, 2013 at JF Chen in Los Angeles in collaboration with MOCA. *Rebel* was an exploration of the myths and legends surrounding James Dean and Nicholas Ray's *Rebel Without a Cause* (1955). When asked why Korine was picked to be one of the contributing artists, Franco explains, "*Rebel without a Cause* was the voice of teenaged rebellion in the 1950s, and no one captures the voice rebellion better than Harmony Korine today."[123] For Korine's section, he reenacted the famous Observatory knife fight scene from *Rebel*, using two female biker gangs, one clad in oversized Tupac Shakur t-shirts and the other in oversized Christopher Wallace tees.

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123 Matt Black. "Inside Rebel: Part Two." *Nowness*. 29 May 2012. <http://www.nowness.com/day/2012/5/29/2179/inside-rebel-part-two>.

Figure 3.44: *Rebel* – Franco flashes gang signs with an African American BMX gang.

Figure 3.45: *Rebel* – Black violence and sexuality are intertwined.

To be certain, Dean, Shakur, and Wallace were all reckless, up-and-coming entertainers who died well before their prime. Many scholars have long established the connection between Dean and Shakur. Dyson writes,

> If Tupac's legend has serviced the psychic and cultural needs of poor black youth, it has also lifted him to the lofty heights of mainstream mythmaking. Tupac is perhaps the first black figure to survive death in the way that only a few

> white icons have managed […] Tupac burrows deep into the popular cultural imagination. He has been viewed as the equivalent of James Dean […][124]

Likewise, Stanley Couch says, "Once that kind of archetype was created – the Afro American version of what Marlon Brando and those guys on motorcycles represented for white America in the late fifties – it began a certain kind of behavior."[125] As a second-generation Black Panther, it is not surprising that Tupac was granted such mythological status. "Elaborating the James Dean connection, director John Singleton hoped that Tupac would avoid what looked like unavoidable fate. 'There was a time in which I was hoping that he wasn't going to be our James Dean,' Singleton says. 'I remember telling somebody, 'It looks like he's still alive; he ain't going to be James Dean.' And then it happened."[126] However, rather than focusing on the unfortunate loss of a political warrior, Korine's portion of *Rebel* focuses on Shakur's East Coast/West Coast rivalry with Christopher Wallace, essentially lumping Wallace, Shakur, and Dean into the same pot. Shakur was a complex, larger than life figure whose life mission was to address unjust social conditions. None of this is revealed in Korine and Franco's collaboration. With naked women riding on BMX bikes and wielding swords, Korine once again portrays Backs as oversexualized and violent. To be fair, one of the gangs in *Rebel* is Caucasian; nevertheless, the Tupac-Biggie battle is a story of black-on-black crime, and it oversimplifies, and arguably exploits, Shakur once again.

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124 Michael Eric Dyson. *Holler if You Hear Me: Searching for Tupac Shakur*. (New York: Basic Civitas Books, 2001) 257.
125 Ibid, 199.
126 Ibid, 258.

Riff Raff

Without giving too much credit to this comedic rapper from Houston, I would definitely be remiss if I failed to address Riff Raff and his relation to both *Spring Breakers* and Korine. A friend of Korine's, Riff Raff was an inspiration for James Franco's "Alien" character in *Spring Breakers*. Riff Raff began rapping in 2005, and he initially achieved notoriety after appearing on MTV's reality television show, "From G's to Gents" in 2009. Although he was quickly elimated from the series, he made an impression on audiences. Due to his strong work ethic and insatiable desire for fame, Riff Raff has become a household name.

Figure 3.46: Korine and Riff Raff, cover of *Sneeze Magazine* No.17, Fall 2012

Figure 3.47: *Spring Breakers* – When one compares Riff Raff and Alien, the resemblance is uncanny.

During press for *Spring Breakers,* Riff Raff used the likeness to bring attention to his aspiring rap career, even going so far as to threaten to sue the producers of the film. According to various sources, Korine initially offered Riff Raff a small role in the project. In an interview with Pitchfork Media, Korine explains, "I'm friends with Riff Raff, and his style is definitely in there. I originally wanted him to be in the sequence next to [Franco's character] on stage. I was trying to put together a white-rapper posse. We sent Riff an email, but his manager saw it too late."[127] Also, Korine and Riff Raff are currently collaborating together on a book about Riff Raff's tweets. A prolific user of social media, especially Vine, YouTube, and Twitter, Riff Raff is an excellent example of a hard-working, contemporary entertainer.

With tattoos of MTV, BET, and WorldStarHip-Hop.com featured prominently on his neck and chest, Riff Raff will stop at almost nothing to get on television. He acts like a clown, appropriates hip-hop aesthetics at random, and is one of the best examples of

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[127] Carrie Battan. "Harmony Korine," *Pitchfork*. Web. 21 March 2013.

modern-day minstrelsy one could find. Many argue whether Riff Raff's raps are in earnest or in jest, and honestly it doesn't much matter either way. As a member of the comedy rap group "Three Loco," it is evident that his gimmick is exploitive. The other two members of "Three Loco," Simon Rex and Andy Milonakis, both have a long history of mocking hip-hop and collaborating with other white comedy rappers. In the following chapter, I will show how whites have not only appropriated hip-hop, but also the Black body and historically Black performance aesthetics for hundreds of years. Riff Raff and *Spring Breakers*' "Alien" character are merely upping the ante a bit.

Destined to become a cult classic, Korine's *Spring Breakers* is rife with stereotypes and misappropriation of historically African American aesthetics. Ostensibly about four girls who leave a southern university for spring break in St. Petersburg, Florida, *Spring Breakers* can be described as both a comedic beach noir and a modern-day race relations story.

CHAPTER 4: *SPRING BREAKERS*

INTRODUCTION

Despite being an unconventional film (Korine describes it as a pop poem), *Spring Breakers* follows the well-known Hollywood formula whereby a white protagonist must subvert a threat posed by an Other. Ramirez-Berg asks, "If the typical Hollywood film story follows the pattern of equilibrium-disequilibrium-equilibrium, then from our perspective it is often the tale of a valiant Anglo male overcoming the threat posed by some Other."[128] As much as Korine wants to portray his film as subversive and well outside the norms of classical Hollywood cinema, when one looks at stereotyping in the film, *Spring Breakers* is arguably as conventional as *The Birth of a Nation* (1915). "The protagonist (Alien) and his love interest (in this case, interests) are handsome Anglos."[129] Moreover, the antagonist (Archie) is Black and unattractive, as well as socially and sexually deviant. This blatant stereotyping was not lost upon Gucci Mane, the rapper who made his acting debut as Archie. Doing press for the film, Mane said, "It's a white movie. I'm the only Black guy in the whole movie. It's a white movie. It's like a white *Pulp Fiction* […] I'm the bad guy. That's what they wanted me to play. I could have been the good guy if they wanted me to."[130] Mane is a rap artist from East Atlanta who predominately raps about drug dealing and has a large ice cream cone tattooed on his cheek.

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128 Charles Ramirez-Berg. *Latino Images in Film: Stereotypes, Subversion, & Resistance*. (Austin: University of Texas Press, 2002) 55.
129 Ibid.
130 Naomi Zeichner. "FADER Explains: What Gucci Mane Is Up To," *Fader*. Web. 12 October 2012.

While doing press for the film, Korine repeatedly brought attention to the fact that Mane was incarcerated when Korine initially asked him to be in the film. Korine explained, "At the time, Gucci was in prison, so we called him in jail, and I said: 'I have a part for you. As soon as you get out of jail, I'll be waiting, just make sure you don't reoffend.'"[131] Korine was aware that Gucci Mane's incarceration would offer a level of authenticity to his drug-dealing gangster character Archie. Again, here is another example of Korine using non-actors in an effort to achieve a higher level of authenticity. In the same interview, Korine said, "I spent a lot of time in Tampa and started to network there. Certain people, real trap heads, are living the life. You piece it together and try to make things as authentic as possible. Some of the people in one of the scenes, for instance, were part of Gucci's posse from Atlanta."[132] In a similar vein, Korine encouraged Franco to hang out with an unsigned white rapper from St. Petersburg, Florida named Dangeruss.

Rather than admit that Riff Raff was the main influence for Alien, Korine and Franco consistently contended that the main influence was Dangeruss. Although they conceded that Alien is amalgamation of sorts, they never admitted that Riff Raff was the primary influence. By giving the credit to Dangeruss, an underground rapper who takes himself seriously, rather than Riff Raff, a comedy-rapper, Korine and Franco attempted to make Alien more authentically thuggish. Dangeruss is involved in gang-related activity and drug dealing. As an example, his hit song "My Fork" is a veiled metaphor for cooking crack cocaine. Dangeruss and Franco are now friends, and they perform onstage together in *Spring Breakers*. Despite Franco and Korine's carefully phrased words for the

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131 Carrie Battan. "Harmony Korine," *Pitchfork*. Web. 21 March 2013.
132 Ibid.

press, it is clear that Alien is, indeed, based on Riff Raff. Much like Riff Raff, Alien is nonthreatening and cartoonish, and he appropriates historically African American aesthetics in an unserious manner. I argue that the character essentially amounts to modern-day minstrelsy.

As I mentioned before, Korine described the premise of *A Crackup at the Race Riots* on Letterman in 1997. It is worth repeating Korine's quote. He said, "It's about a race war, and it happens in Florida, and the Jewish people sit in trees, and the Black people – the Blacks are run by M.C. Hammer and the whites are run by Vanilla Ice. It takes place in Florida."[133] In hindsight, that synopsis more closely matches the plot of *Spring Breakers*. Korine is the Jewish person looking down on his subjects; Archie is M.C. Hammer, and Alien is Vanilla Ice. Although Hammer and Ice may have been respected at one point in time, by 1997 they were considered clownish and not to be taken seriously. Likewise, Korine can say that he respects Riff Raff and Gucci Mane as much as he wants; in reality, they are fodder for his minstrel.

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133 Harmony Korine. Interview with David Letterman. *Late Show with David Letterman*. CBS. 17 Oct.1997.

Figure 4.1: Riff Raff – Amongst other things, the pumpkin chain and Bart Simpson tattoo make Riff Raff seem clownish.

Figure 4.2: Gucci Mane – With an ice cream cone tattoo on his face, Gucci Mane is both visibly deviant and buffoonish, fulfilling what Bogle would describe as coon and buck tropes.

CRITICAL RACE THEORY

Fungibility

Although I briefly referenced the critical race theorists Saidaya Hartman and Frank Wilderson earlier, I will expand upon Hartman's work in this chapter. As very few would try to refute, African Americans were shaped in unspeakable ways by the horrors of slavery, and the legacy of slavery can still be felt in this country today. According to Hartman, the "innocent amusements" that Blacks were forced to endure spoke volumes about the white psyche. Hartman writes, "The pageantry of the coffle, stepping it up lively on the auction block, going before the master, and the blackface mask of minstrelsy and melodrama all evidenced the entanglements of terror and enjoyment."[134] The ridiculous idea that Blacks were enjoying themselves made whites feel more comfortable with the institution of slavery. As a commodity, slaves were interchangeable. They were what Hartman describes as "fungible." She posits that whites, even abolitionists who attempted to empathize with black plight, on some level, took pleasure in the horrors of slavery. Not only did slavery solidify and ensure white's dominion over Blacks, but it also provided whites with flights of fancy during which they tried to put themselves in the Black's position. Hartman explains:

> The relation between pleasure and the possession of slave property, in both the figurative and literal senses, can be explained in part by the fungibility of the slave – that is, the joy made possible by virtue of the replaceability and interchangeability endemic to the commodity […] Put differently, the fungibility of the commodity makes the captive body an abstract and empty vessel vulnerable to the projection of others' feelings, ideas, desires, and values; and as property, the dispossessed body of the enslaved is the surrogate for the

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134 Saidiya V. Hartman *Scenes of Subjection: Terror, Slavery, and Self-Making in Nineteenth-Century America*. (New York: Oxford University Press, 1997) 23.

> master's body since it guarantees his disembodied universality and acts as a sign of his power and dominion.[135]

This idea that the Black body was a locus of white enjoyment is not limited to the days of chattel slavery. In fact, scholars outside of the critical race theory domain have recently cited instances of the captive Black body. For example, in regard to Tupac Shakur, Michael Eric Dyson writes, "As a famously controversial Black icon, Tupac's body was never completely his own."[136] I argue that some whites still use the Black body as a source of pleasure, and that we can draw a parallel between the minstrels of yesteryear and the representations in *Spring Breakers*.

Minstrelsy

I agree with Hartman that whites take pleasure in accumulating the fungible Black body. Whether it is through pondering Black plight (trying to self-identify with Blacks) or if it is via blackface performances, whites use the Black body as a vehicle of enjoyment. Hartman explains, "The fungibility of the commodity, specifically its abstractness and immateriality, enabled the black body or blackface mask to serve as the vehicle of white self-exploration, renunciation, and enjoyment."[137] By portraying Blacks as carefree, hedonistic, and immune to suffering, minstrelsy made whites feel empowered, and it maintained the divide between the two races. "The Manichaeanism at the heart of minstrelsy was the division between the races. The seeming transgressions of the color line and the identification forged with the blackface mask through aversion

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135 Ibid, 21.

136 Michael Eric Dyson. *Holler if You Hear Me: Searching for Tupac Shakur*. (New York: Basic Civitas Books, 2001) 233.

137 Hartman, Saidiya V. *Scenes of Subjection: Terror, Slavery, and Self-Making in Nineteenth-Century America*. New York: Oxford University Press, 1997. 26.

and/or desire ultimately served only to reinforce relations of mastery and servitude."[138] Albeit on a less tangible level, modern-day minstrelsy does precisely the same thing. Just as "the donning of blackface restaged the seizure and possession of the black body for the other's use and enjoyment,"[139] the appropriation of historically Black aesthetics is a repossession of the Black body for white enjoyment.

JAMES FRANCO AS ALIEN

Like comedic rapper Riff Raff, James Franco's Alien character is a clown. He is a caricature of Blackness. As Joshua Clover and Shane Boyle phrased it, Alien is a racial poseur. They write, "The rapper/thug aspirant Alien played by James Franco, whose profound whiteness allows him to pass from one world to the other. He raps, he burbles Britney ballads. He slangs product, hangs with the breakers […] From his grillz to his home décor, he is a racial poseur." Even the name "Alien" is in jest. He drives around with an alien decal on his car, has an alien lava lamp in his bedroom, and alien balloons billow in the wind at his concerts. Not only does the name "Alien" suggest an attempt at Otherness, it also refers to contemporary southern rappers, such as Outkast and Lil' Wayne, who have both used the alien aesthetic to suggest that their raps are other-worldly. The Atlanta based rap-duo Outkast put out their famous 1996 album, ATLiens, which went double platinum, and New Orleans' Lil Wayne is famous for lines, such as "I'm not like you. I'm a martian."[140]

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138 Ibid, 29

139 Ibid, 31-2.

140 Chris Norris. "Weezy Phone Home: Is Lil Wayne Hip-Hop's Alien or Simply the Greatest?" *Rolling Stone Magazine*. 3 February 2010.

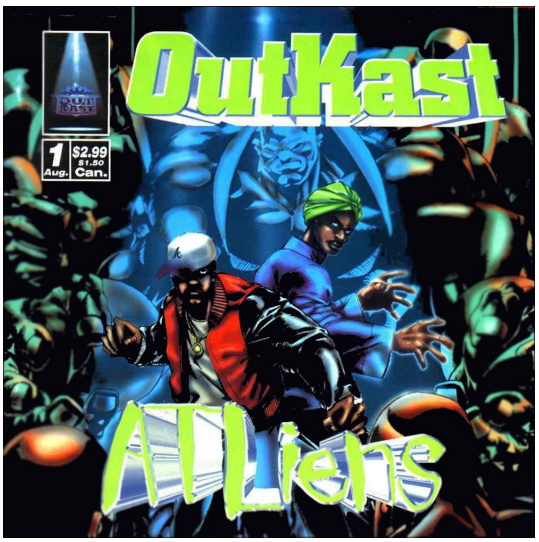

Figure 4.3 – Cover of Outkast's double platinum album *ATLiens.*

Copying these rappers aesthetics, Riff Raff has a prominent tattoo of a green Alien on his arm. In fact, it is the same exact logo as the decal on Alien's car in *Spring Breakers*. Riff Raff also put out an album called *The Golden Alien* in 2012.

Figure 4.4 – Cover of Riff Raff's *The Golden Alien*. Also, "Golden Alien" suggests a lighter pigment than Black.

Unlike Wayne and Outkast, who were at least somewhat serious in their artistic expression, Riff Raff and Franco's Alien character are entirely in jest. When *Complex Magazine* writer Ross Scarano asked Korine, "The white guy adopting black

mannerisms, will that person always be the clown?"[141] Korine replied, "I think there are clownish elements to Alien, but he does have a real swagger, too. But largely speaking, I'm not sure. I don't know."[142] Regardless, Korine appropriates the Black body (or in this case, Black aesthetics) for his own comedic purposes, and this is arguably modern-day minstrelsy.

ATL Twins

Although they are not granted any lines of dialogue, the ATL twins, Sidney and Thurman Sewell, are afforded quite a bit of screen time in *Spring Breakers*. The twins are Alien's friends and drug-runners, and their presence fleshes out the comedic entity that is Alien. In both reality and in the film, the twins have braided hair, gold teeth, and baggy attire. They came to the attention of Korine and other Hollywood power players after a controversial *Vice Magazine* interview. In May of 2012, Korine cast the twins in his music video for the Black Keys' song, "Gold on the Ceiling." Like Riff Raff, the twins are aspiring entertainers. Unlike Riff Raff, who does comedic rap, the twins seek a life of celebrity solely based on their image and lifestyle. They do everything together, including always sleeping with the same women, a bizarre fact that is explicitly addressed in *Spring Breakers*. Once again, here we see Korine's fascination with deviance, his penchant for casting non-actors, and his incendiary form of humor. Additionally, it is important to note that is an extremely small world for aspiring entertainers whose main gimmick is to appropriate Black aesthetics. The twins appeared in Riff Raff's "Peppermint Tint" music video, which was released in December of 2012.

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141 Ross Scarano. "Interview: Harmony Korine Talks 'Spring Breakers' as a Pop Song, Chief Keef, and How White People Ruin Everything." *Complex*. Web. 15 March 2013.
142 Ibid.

Figure 4.5 – Terry Richardson photograph for *Vice Magazine*.

Figure 4.6: *Spring Breakers* – Alien.

Figure 4.7: *Spring Breakers* – The ATL Twins.

RACE RELATIONS

Brit, Candy uninterested in Black struggle

Four minutes into *Spring Breakers*, there is an extremely powerful scene that foreshadows the rest of the film. During a college lecture on the Civil Rights movement, Candy (Vanessa Hudgens) and Brit (Ashley Benson) sit in the back of the auditorium and exchange notes. Disinterested in the lecture, the two women exchange notes about spring break and sex. Ignoring the lecture, Candy pantomimes oral sex and then shoots herself in the head, presumably because she is bored by the lecture. Because *Spring Breakers* is ultimately a film about race relations, I think it's important to include the professor's lecture in its entirety. The juxtaposition between the content of the lecture and the girls' behavior speaks volumes. During establishing shots of the campus and packed auditorium, the professor says:

We're going to talk about something that's a little bit deeper. A little harder to get at, which is the Civil Rights movement, or the Black freedom struggle, or what some historians call the Second Reconstruction, which I really like because it ties it to the First Reconstruction after the Civil War – to show that there is a continuum. There is a conscious struggle on the part of African Americans in the South to claim their freedom, their liberty,

Figure 4.8: ***Spring Breakers*** *– and without a doubt, World War II really provides the fuel for this…*

Figure 4.9: ***Spring Breakers*** *– That when you go overseas to fight Hitler, you get shot at, you see your friends killed, you're gonna come home a different person…*

Figure 4.10: ***Spring Breakers*** *– You're gonna come back a radicalized individual willing to risk life and limb…*

Figure 4.11: *Spring Breakers* *– So, the Double V campaign during the war is quite interesting…*

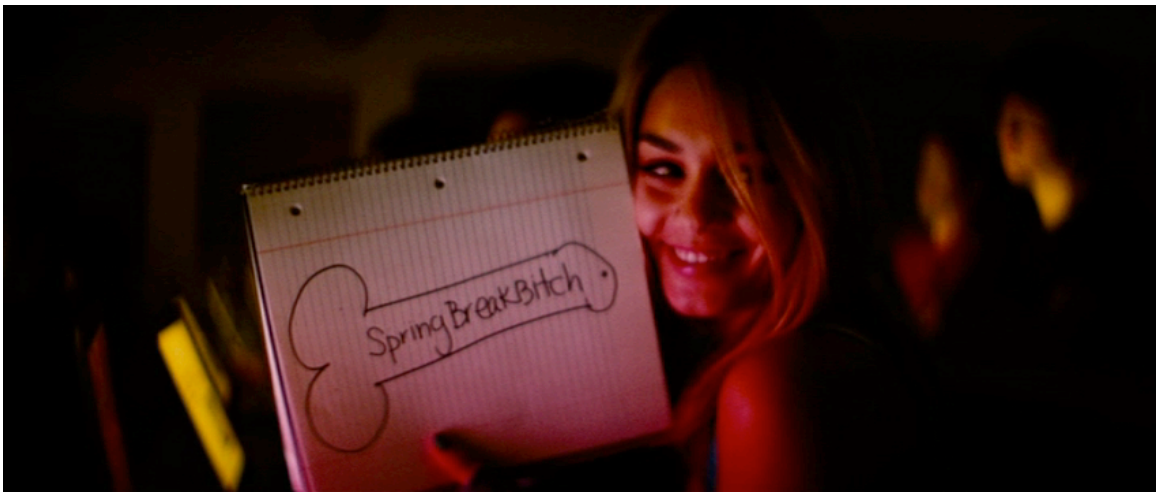

Figure 4.12: *Spring Breakers* *– It stood for 'Victory at Home' and 'Victory Abroad'…*

Figure 4.13: *Spring Breakers* *– Defeat Hitler and fascism and his racist policies…*

Figure 4.14: ***Spring Breakers*** *– but also defeat Jim Crow and the racist South…*

Figure 4.15 ***Spring Breakers*** *– And they tried to do that, but they needed some help […]*

Thus, early in the film, Candy and Brit are depicted as both highly sexualized and disinterested in the African American struggle.

I highlight this scene because it presages the end of the film, when Candy and Brit have sex with Alien, and then the two girls massacre Archie and 10 other Blacks on Archie's *Scarface*-esque estate. Also, I appreciate the professor's lecture; especially the part where he says he likes the term 'Second Reconstruction' because it suggests that the Black struggle for equality exists on a continuum. Of course, that continuum has extended to present day. Although the professor's dialogue was not in the original script, Korine was certainly aware of the powerful juxtaposition between the girls' behavior and

the lecture. Korine says, "[The professor's] giving a history lesson on Jim Crow and race relations, which is tied into the rest of the film."[143]

ESSENTIALIST REPRESENTATIONS OF BLACKS

Aside from the occasional African American college student who pops up on the margins of the frame, nearly all of the Blacks in *Spring Breakers* are depicted as drug dealing, gun-totting gangsters. Rather than point out the more obvious essentialist representations, I have chosen to examine two scenes where Korine's seemingly innocuous representations of Blacks are far more sinister in nature. As Saidaya Hartman once told Frank Wilderson, "It's in those moments of seeming innocence where the pernicious social text is revealed."[144] The first scene, which is replayed twice during the film, is the Chicken Shack robbery.

Chicken Shack Robbery

To raise money for their trip to Florida, three of the girls steal an el Camino, and then Candy and Brit rob a fried chicken restaurant. Cotty (Rachel Korine) is the get-away driver. They advise one another to "pretend it's a video game" or "act like it's a movie or something." The robbery occurs unbeknownst to the comparatively pious Faith (Selena Gomez).

In a tracking shot, while Nicki Minaj plays through the el Camino's speakers, we watch Brit and Cotty smash hammers on patrons' tables, then approach a Black man

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143 Harmony Korine. *Spring Breakers*. Lionsgate, 2013. DVD.

144 Saidiya V. Hartman, Frank B. Hartman (2003) "The Position of the Unthought." *Qui Parle*. 13 (2): 196.

eating by himself at the rear of the restaurant. When the camera tracks toward the Black man, the diegetic Nicki Minaj music stops, and we hear ominous, non-diegetic heavy bass. Unlike the petrified whites, who are seated in the front of the restaurant, the Black man at the back is unafraid. He doesn't flinch when threatened with a sledgehammer; in fact, he even continues to eat while a gun is against his neck. This tracking shot positions Blacks as tougher than whites and more adapted to crime. The shot lasts one minute in length, from 15:40 – 16:40 on the time code.

Figure 4.16: ***Spring Breakers*** – The white woman is petrified.

Figure 4.17: ***Spring Breakers*** –As is the white man.

Figure 4.18: ***Spring Breakers*** – Another scared white man.

Figure 4.19: ***Spring Breakers*** – Comparatively, the Black man is unafraid.

Figure 4.20: ***Spring Breakers*** – The color palette changes, as the girls leave the chicken shack.

Figure 4.21: *Spring Breakers* – Thirteen minutes later, when the girls recount the events to Faith, we see a portion of this same exact tracking shot again.

Strip Club Scene

Alexander Benaim eloquently writes, "*Spring Breakers* is a cartoon of the contemporary south, by a son of the contemporary south […] black skin gets demonized."[145] I agree with Benaim's position. During the strip club scene, the audience is introduced to Archie for the first time. Breaking basic screenwriting rules, the exposition is laid on thick. In a voiceover, Alien explains, "He used to be a friend. Now he's an enemy. The call him Big Arch. Them dudes is straight off the block, no joke, murderers, killers, base-heads, motherf***g nightmares walking."[146] Because spectators are so familiar with the gross stereotype of African Americans as pathologically violent crack-addicts, Korine only needs one line of dialogue to summarize Archie and his gang.

145 Alexander Benaim. "Spring Break Forever: Fort Slaughterdale." *The New Inquiry*. 17 April 2013.
146 Harmony Korine. *Spring Breakers*. Lionsgate, 2013. DVD.

Figure 4.23: *Spring Breakers* – Benoit Debie's close up of Archie. The ice cream cone tattoo is in focus, and Archie is lit in a feverish red hue.

GUCCI MANE AS ARCHIE

Dialogue

Archie (Gucci Mane) does not enter *Spring Breakers* until the strip club scene, which is 56 minutes into the film. Not only is Archie underrepresented on screen, but he is also given very little in the way of dialogue. He says 332 words in the entire film, and his dialogue is often mumbled, bordering on unintelligible. During the climactic ending, when Brit and Candy shoot Archie dead in his hot tub, he's not granted any last words; his lips move, but the onscreen sound is muted, and the audience only hears the film's score: Skrillex's "Scary Monsters on Strings."

Much of Archie's dialogue is improvised, and Korine definitely strove to retain the lines that would make him look the most inane. For example, when Cotty (Rachel Korine) is shot during a drive by shooting, Archie screams "Burr," Gucci Mane's trademark phrase that is tattooed on his face. Supposedly, "burr" is the idea that Gucci Mane is cold because he wears so much ice (rap parlance for jewelry). Additionally, in the director's commentary for *Spring Breakers*, Korine says he kept another one of Mane's improvised lines in the film because he thought it was funny. Put simply, Archie

is not to be taken seriously; he is a cartoonish, essentialist representation of a sexually deviant, misogynistic gangster.

Sexual Deviance

The first time we see Archie is at a strip club, where he intensely watches naked African American women gyrate. Later, he has sex with two women in a domineering manner. Although both Archie and Alien have threesomes in *Spring Breakers*, only Archie is portrayed as sexually deviant. The Alien, Candy, and Brit threesome is in a swimming pool, with the scene lit warmly in vibrant fluorescent hues. Alien's sex scene includes smiling, laughing, and dialogue such as "I think I love ya'll," and "We think we love you."[147] A general playfulness permeates the scene.

In stark contrast to Alien's sex scene, Archie is portrayed as misogynistic and sexually threatening. Shot in a palette of gray, brown, and tans, Archie has sex with two heavy-set women, and he is the only one who speaks. It is clear Archie is in a position of power, as one of the women even kisses his feet. Later in the scene, Archie forces the two women to shower together, as he sits in a hot tub, smoking a cigar and calling out sexual orders from across the room. As we see, Archie is stereotypically represented as an aggressive sexual deviant, similar to what Bogle described as a brutal buck.

Poolhall Scene

Looking to get the most visceral reactions possible, Korine did not tell the four actresses where they were headed on the day of the poolhall scene shoot. Clad in fluorescent bikinis, the girls stand out among the African Americans in the smoky poolhall. The girls are in considerably less danger than they were when they were with

147 Harmony Korine. *Spring Breakers*. Lionsgate, 2013. DVD.

the frat boys the previous night. Nevertheless, Faith is terrified. She complains to Brit, Candy, and Cotty, saying, "These people, touching us and talking to us. I don't know them and I don't feel comfortable."[148] To be fair, Faith is shaken up after spending the previous night in jail, but being in such close proximity to the African Americans at the poolhall scares her much more than the prospect of being groped by random white frat boys.

Aside from Faith's monologue and her private conversation with Alien in the backroom, there is almost no audible dialogue in the poolhall scene. On the one hand, this helps to maintain the dreamlike ambiance that permeates throughout the film. On the other hand, it is further proof that Blacks are not given a voice onscreen. During the one and only instance when we clearly hear a Black voice, it is a man taunting his friend, "You better run, like you're running from the police."[149] In the backroom scene, three Blacks sit on the couch and smoke, but they do not converse with one another.

Figure 4.24: *Spring Breakers* – This man's shirt reads, "enjoy vagina." Korine makes an attempt at humor, while simultaneously portraying this African American man as both cartoonish and sexually deviant. Take a look at the man's right hand. One can only hope that the man was subtly flicking off the camera.

148 Harmony Korine. *Spring Breakers*. Lionsgate, 2013. DVD.
149 Ibid.

Figure 4.25: *Spring Breakers* – The African American man is featured prominently in the frame to suggest the girls are in danger. Before this shot, the man scratches the stubble on his chin, while he eavesdrops on Alien and Faith's conversation. His sole purpose in this scene is to look menacing.

Figure 4.26: *Spring Breakers* – We saw this visual strategy employed earlier in the film as well. In the background, the ATL twins stand ominously, while vertical tree trunks fill the frame, conveying a sense of anxiety.

Almost all Blacks, and to be fair, most whites, in *Spring Breakers* exist as part of the mise-en-scene, rather than characters. The ATL twins, despite their abundant screen time, are not granted a single line of dialogue. In what world would the ATL twins be standing in that location? Likewise, when would a man scratch his chin as if hatching an evil plan, stand a few feet away from two people talking, and not say a single word? Moreover, is it realistic to think three people would sit on a couch without even

acknowledging one another? In *Spring Breakers*, even crucial plot points are fatally flawed. At the beach, twenty feet away from the stage, the girls sing along while Alien and Dangeruss perform Alien's hit song, "Hanging with the Dope Boys," but then a few hours later, when Alien bails them out of prison, the girls have never seen him before. Korine attempted to created a dreamlike film; so from that perspective, he was successful. Nevertheless, it does not change the fact that the Blacks in the film are not granted any dialogue. We are watching a dream all right: Korine's dream, and it reveals a lot about his inner psyche.

CHAPTER 5: CONCLUSION

In his November 2, 2013 film review of *Spring Breakers,* James Franco gives high praise for the film in which he stars. The piece ran in *Vice Magazine*, which incidentally is the hipster equivalent of *The New York Times*. In this review, which I believe is partly sincere and partly tongue-in-cheek, Franco writes:

> I can't even take credit for Alien. He is Harmony's. As he says, Alien is a gangster mystic. A clown, a killer, a lover: the spirit of the age. Riff Raff wants to take credit for this creation, but that simplifies it. It is like Neal Cassady laying claim to Jack Kerouc's Dean Moriarty, which isn't a great comparison because Kerouac was transparently and literally writing about Neal […] Some motherfuckers say they are depressed by the film because of the way it depicts our times, these be the motherfuckers who have a stake in representing our times to ourselves, those other motherfuckers in the entertainment business who want to present the clean polished, heteronormative, nerds, jocks, and white-dudes-win kind of lifestyle. Well, here is the film that shows the white dudes, the privileged dudes, using black culture, YouTube culture, *any culture* that fits their needs to entertain themselves, to turn themselves into stars in their own minds and the minds of those around them. This is reality; this is Instagram.

There is quite a bit going on here, but I want to focus on the penultimate line of Franco's quote. According to Franco himself, *Spring Breakers* is a film about fungibility and the misappropriation of African American aesthetics. He is speaking specifically about Riff Raff. Without a doubt, Riff Raff is the privileged white man using Black culture to turn himself into a star, and he is certainly using YouTube and Vine in the process. As I mentioned before, Riff Raff is prolific on social media. He puts out YouTube videos, Vines, and Tweets more often than almost any other contemporary entertainer. Similarly, in *Spring Breakers*, Alien he tells the girls to check his rap videos on YouTube. And this

is what *Spring Breakers* is about: Riff Raff and white artists who ironically appropriate Black culture to get ahead.

That being said, *Spring Breakers* is not an intellectual commentary on Riff Raff misappropriating black culture. If Riff Raff is at fault, so are Franco and Korine. With *Spring Breakers*, Korine is not exposing what's wrong with "our times," as Franco suggests; if anything, Korine and Franco are reinforcing what's wrong. They are privileged Hollywood artists exploiting African American aesthetics in the name of irony and comedy. Korine genuinely thinks Riff Raff is funny; he initially offered him a role in *Spring Breakers*, and he will likely collaborate with him in the near future, whether it is a book of tweets or another project. *Spring Breakers* is not a scathing disapproval of Riff Raff and YouTube culture. It is an endorsement of it.

As we learned earlier, Korine wanted to make a feature-length minstrel called the "Grace of Blackface," and he wanted to tell a tale about a Florida race war, where the whites are led by Vanilla Ice and the blacks by MC Hammer. With *Spring Breakers,* he has essentially done both, substituting Gucci Mane for MC Hammer and Riff Raff for Vanilla Ice.

<u>Figure 5.1 – 5.4</u> – Clockwise from the upper left corner: MC Hammer, Vanilla Ice, Riff Raff, Gucci Mane.

To be sure, much more analyses could be done on the dreamy aesthetics of *Spring Breakers*. Much of the film feels like a music video; scantily clad women, provocative dancing, and gunshots abound. With a median shot length of 3.1 seconds, even the editing is MTV style. The tone is both surreal and comical, and the photography inundates the viewer with waves of neon. Incidentally, Riff Raff's upcoming album is called "Neon Icon," so come January 2014, there undoubtedly will be a slew of new

YouTube videos that mirror the *Spring Breakers*' aesthetic. In fact, future media scholars should definitely compare *Spring Breakers* to hip-hop music videos.

FUTURE RESEARCH CONSIDERATIONS

Spring Breakers as Homage to 1990's Hip-Hop Videos

Fifteen years after Hype Williams' placed a clip from Korine's *Gummo* in his film *Belly*, Korine pays homage to Williams and other 1990's-era hip-hop music video directors. *Spring Breakers* could almost be considered a 106 minute-long music video in and of itself, but the film has several segments that are influenced by the rap videos shot by Williams, Spike Jonze, David Dobbins, and others in the late 1990's and early 2000's.

Figure 5.5 – 5.19: *Spring Breakers* – At the onset of the poolhall scene, a gunshot fires, signifying a transition, and Gucci Mane and Wack Flacka Flame's "Young Nias" plays. Despite the nondiegetic nature of the rap song, we cut to people dancing outside the poolhall. Perhaps more than any other scene, this sequence parallels a hip-hop music video. And what's more, it incorporates billiards, much**

like the scene from *Belly*. In fact, it is the cue ball smacking against the other pool balls that brings us back into diegetic sound. Figure 5.17, the shot of the four-wheeler spinning doughnuts in the street, is also particularly telling. DMX, the rapper who stars in *Belly*, famously featured four-wheelers in his music videos.

It could certainly be argued that Korine is paying homage to Williams through this sequence. Korine is not above nostalgia. For example, he uses the same costuming in *Spring Breakers* and *Gummo*.

Figure 4.29: *Gummo*.

Figure 4.30: *Spring Breakers*.

At any rate, a closer look at *Spring Breakers* and hip-hop videos from the late 1990's would be very interesting.

Brian De Palma's *Scarface* and Quentin Tarantino

In this thesis, I was more concerned with Korine's racial representations than his visual aesthetics. Nevertheless, in regard to aesthetics, I would argue that one could certainly write an essay comparing *Spring Breakers* to Brian De Palma's *Scarface*. Not only does the De Palma film get referenced throughout, but the lighting and compositioning is strikingly similar as well.

Additionally, I think scholars should do much more work on hipster racism. In this regard, Quentin Tarantino would be an ideal point of departure. Other than Spike Lee, I can think of very few film critics, academics, or industry personnel who have called Tarantino out for his racist portrayals of African Americans. As a rather obvious example, Tarantino's white characters have long used the "n" word, and while playing Jimmy Dimmick in *Pulp Fiction* (1994), Tarantino himself uses the "n" word. Presumably, Tarantino feels comfortable using the word because of his hipster status. Also, in the case of *Pulp Fiction*, Dimmick's character was married to an African American woman (Venessia Valentino), so Tarantino had that narrative excuse to fall back on as well. Interestingly, people have already started to make comparisons between Korine and Tarantino.

As I mentioned earlier, Gucci Mane described *Spring Breakers* as "the white *Pulp Fiction*." Likewise, Joshua Clover and Shane Boyle compare the ending of *Spring Breakers* to Tarantino's *Django Unchained* (2012). They write, "It is hard to know, then, what to make of the film's conclusion, wherein the white girls' expropriation of a black

man is replayed with higher stakes all around. We could say it is *Django*'s finale dialed up a notch, at once more absurd and more historically accurate." Given the dreamlike nature of *Spring Breakers*, I would posit that the ending, like the rest of the film, is not meant to be taken literally. Nevertheless, *Spring Breakers* is Korine's dream, and it's arguably filled with his subconscious, essentialist views of African Americans.

Das Racist

In regard to hipster racism, more work should be done on rap artists. Looking at non-Black, comedic rappers would be fruitful, and the Wesleyan-educated, hipster rap-duo Das Racist would be a great starting point, as they were the pioneers of joke rap. At least Das Racist had the good sense to acknowledge the precarious position of their non-Blackness, going so far as to acknowledge it in their group's name. Some have argued that rap has been stripped of all meaning, other than glorifying drugs and crime; likewise, "some have deemed [*Spring Breakers*] a racist glorification of drugs and crime."[150] So, again, an in-depth comparison of *Spring Breakers* to contemporary rap could be beneficial.

Lastly, Korine is a self-proclaimed provocateur, and with Internet-enabled devices permeating every nook of our contemporary existence, it is getting increasingly more difficult for artists like Korine and Riff Raff to achieve the attention and shock value they so desperately crave. Provocative media bombard us more than ever. What does this mean for our future, and how will it affect racial relations for forthcoming generations? From *Kids* to *Spring Breakers*, Korine has offered us a portal to the inner workings of

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150 Cord Jefferson. "Spring Break Forever: The Real Beach Lives of Miami." *The New Inquiry*. 17 April 2013.

disaffected youth, and as I argue in this thesis, Korine has offered us another portal as well: one into the innerworkings of hipster racism. Much more scholarly work needs to be done here.

SUMMARY OF FINDINGS

As I mentioned in the introduction, Korine frequently tells interviewers and audiences that Blacks are his favorite people, and that whites ruin everything. In essence, Korine's tactic is to publicly align himself with Blacks (and by extension hip-hop culture), thus solidifying his stature as "hip," and granting himself a pass when it comes to racial stereotyping. Considering how often Korine employs stereotypical tropes without much backlash, this tactic may be working. That being said, it is probably not Korine's outspoken love for African Americans that allows his pejorative portrayals of Blacks to go unnoticed; it is his "hipster status."

Due to his works in the contemporary art world and his proclivity for provocation, Korine has established himself as an enlightened, erudite artist who is accepted among most of the art crowd. With this distinction come two fairly clear benefits: firstly, Korine is able to make stereotypical representations of Blacks without receiving much pushback. Secondly, he is able to present characters in blackface. To be fair, as I noted earlier, blackface performance seems to be becoming more palatable, especially among younger audiences and when actors who are of mixed racial or mixed ethnic status perform it. Nevertheless, every time Korine engages in blackface performance, it is always a white person, often times Korine himself, and he seems to be nostalgic for the older, more sinister blackface representations. In the second chapter, I inventoried all the times Korine worked with characters in blackface because I wanted to establish a clear pattern

of behavior. I even highlighted the years in this section because I did not want readers to think these representations only occurred during Korine's drug-addled years. At any rate, it became clear that Korine has nostalgia for the stereotypical blackface comedies of yesteryear, and his hipster status grants him free reign to employ such humor in his work.

As I attempted to show throughout this thesis, Korine's subject matter and stylistic choices have not changed much over the last 15 years. With *Spring Breakers,* Korine finally created his Florida race riot story, and he also fulfilled his dream of creating a feature-length minstrel. Rather than putting a minstrel's cork on his protagonist's face, Korine dressed him up like Riff Raff: a parody of hip-hop culture and a walking misappropriation of Black cultural aesthetics. This cultural theft is nothing new of course. As discussed, white people have been appropriating and diluting Black cultural elements since the origin of this country. I cited blues, jazz, R&B, and most recently, hip-hop as examples. Referencing the work of Saidaya Hartman, I argued that it is precisely due to the legacy of slavery that white artists like Korine are able to appropriate Black aesthetics in the first place.

Again, Hartman believes that slavery has rendered the Black body a fungible commodity, one that can be freely appropriated by whites to this day. Looking closely at *Spring Breakers*, it appears that her theory is valid. Franco's Alien character is able to pick and choose his historically Black aesthetics as he sees fit. Alien is a cultural tourist, a caricature of Blackness, and a clown. Despite not technically being African American, Alien fits neatly into Bogle's coon trope. Like so many of Korine's previous portrayals of Black characters, Alien is a buffoonish clown who is onscreen for our amusement. In addition to Alien being a modern-day minstrel performer, all of the film's other Black characters are stereotypes as well.

Not only are the Blacks in the poolhall scene not granted dialogue, but they also are relegated to the fringe of the mise en scene and the fringe of respectability. In fact, Faith is so scared of the Blacks that she decides to call it quits. She believes these men are like the bucks in *Birth of a Nation*: oversexed, savage, violent, and lusting after white women. One Black man's shirt says, "Enjoy vagina;" another stands ominously in the background; Faith complains that they are touching her, and nondiegetic gunshots denote the scene changes. To be sure, almost all the Blacks in Korine's dream-like film are stereotyped as gangsters, drug dealers, and sexual deviants.

The only Black character we got to know very well, and the only one granted multiple lines of dialogue, is Archie. As we witnessed, this is problematic because Archie is stereotypically portrayed as both a coon and a buck, to use Bogle's parlance. He has an ice cream cone tattoo on his face, and much of his dialogue is virtually inaudible or intended to be comical. At the same time, he is greedy, cruel, violent, and sexually deviant. Archie vows to kill his former friend (Alien) over money; he shoots a defenseless girl (Cotty), and he domineeringly directs his own private sex shows. Without a doubt, Archie's character is rife with stereotypes.

With the success of *Spring Breakers*, Korine will likely create more stereotypical work in the years to come. He has already vowed to collaborate with Riff Raff and Franco on upcoming projects, and if the three artists' track records are an indicator, we will see hipster racism at work again soon. As a provocateur, Korine will surely continue to create incendiary art. One can only help that he moves beyond the trite stereotypes that have plagued his work thus far.

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